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Editorial Introduction: Relocating East–West Migration and (Im)Mobilities

Russell King*, Laura Moroşanu**, Mari-Liis Jakobson***,
Garbi Schmidt****, Md Farid Miah*****, Raivo
Vetik*****, Jenny Money*****

This introductory paper sets the scene for the special issue. It describes the rationale for the collection – which has to do with the multiple geopolitical, economic and health-related events of the past 30 years – and summarises some of the overarching changes in East–West migration dynamics within and beyond Europe over this period. However, this introductory article and the nine papers that follow also challenge and nuance the predominant East–West framing of recent intra-European migration. They identify numerous other trends: return migration and immigration into CEE countries, intra-CEE migrations and a range of issues relating to the impacts of migration on children and youth.

Keywords: East–West migration, return migration, children and youth, geopolitical change in Europe, migration motives

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Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the removal of the Iron Curtain and, even more so, since the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, the East–West axis came to dominate the geography of migration flows in Europe. Succeeding this epochal geopolitical change were a series of economic, political and health-related events – the 2008 financial crisis, the so-called migration and refugee crisis of 2015–2016, the ‘Brexit’ referendum of 2016 and its aftermath, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 and, most recently, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, launched in early 2022 – all of which have had, and are still having, profound effects on migration and mobility trends within and beyond Europe.

The above constellation of geopolitical and economic events and their consequences for ongoing migration dynamics provide the setting for the nine papers that follow in this special issue. The papers are a careful selection from the 42 presented to an international conference hosted by the University of Sussex on 15–16 November 2021. The conference was entitled ‘New Dynamics of East–West Migration and Migrant Integration Within Europe and Beyond’ and was organised as part of the academic activities of the Horizon 2020 MIRNet project.¹ For most of the approximately 50 attendees, this was their first in-person conference for more than 18 months, due to the suspension of ‘normal’ face-to-face collective events during the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the conference followed a mode which has latterly become the ‘new normal’, which is to organise such events in a hybrid fashion, with a mixture of in-person and online presentations and discussions.

Whilst the East–West migration axis remains the dominant organising frame for the special issue, the papers that follow challenge, broaden and nuance this ‘compass migration’ and also draw attention to new temporalities of migration and (im)mobility. On a world scale, compass migrations are those which are framed by global macro-regions of North, South, East and West, including migrations which take place within such regions, for instance South–South or intra-East.² The papers collectively stress the multi-directionality and multi-temporality of new migration and mobility flows unfolding in recent decades, whereby geographical and typological diversity and the spontaneous emergence of new migrations have been key features of the new map of European migration (King and Okólski 2019).

Three themes structured the conference and are represented in the papers that follow:

Theme 1: From emigration to immigration and fluid mobilities

Theme 2: From emigration to return migration

Theme 3: Children, youth and the 1.5/2nd generation

Each of these represents a different kind of migration transition characteristic of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. The first is arguably the most fundamental: the ‘migration turnaround’ from net emigration to net immigration which tends to occur when a country or region experiences economic growth and modernisation. Interestingly, in the CEE region we observe a parallel set of geopolitical, economic and migration transitions which are all closely interrelated. The collapse of the communist or state-socialist regimes in the region unlocked the floodgates to emigration which had been closed for most of the postwar period. In the words of one book on the subject, Europe became ‘a continent moving West’ (Black, Engbersen, Okólski and Panţîru 2010).

Pretty soon, however, these initial emigration waves led to other mobilities, including return migration (some of which was automatically enfolded into regimes of shuttle and circular migration) and migrations into and within the CEE region driven by labour shortages in the more prosperous CEE countries (e.g. Poland, Czechia, Slovenia) and income gaps between them and poorer countries to the east and south (e.g. Ukraine,

Moldova, Albania). Whilst most of these CEE-focused migrations can be considered labour migrations motivated by the need to find work and access higher incomes, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused a massive refugee flow since early 2022.

Eurostat data³ for the CEE11 countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) for 2011–2020 allow us to be more precise about recent migration trends, bearing in mind the limitations of such official figures in capturing migration in an era of free movement. The data reveal that, at an aggregate level, the migration balance moved from net emigration to net immigration in 2018, largely due to return migration rather than immigration from other countries. Apparently, the large-scale, indeed dramatic, emigration to wealthier 'Western' EU countries that predominated after free-movement rights were extended to the new 'Eastern' member states is becoming substituted by a pattern of temporary mobility whereby many migrants return after a few years abroad. Meantime, emigration has continued at quite high levels throughout the decade. Immigration from other EU countries remains relatively low. However, the wage gap and difference in living standards are already notable with the non-EU countries in the wider CEE region, with immigration developing from countries such as Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, especially to Poland and Czechia.

Given that most of the papers that follow in this special issue feature Poland and/or Romania, a few specific remarks on the statistical migration trends in these two countries are in order, also because these two countries are by far the largest in population terms in the CEE11 group and their migration profiles are quite distinct from each other. Table 1 gives the figures. Poland's annual emigration figures remained high throughout most of the decade in question, only dipping below 200,000 in the final three years 2018–2022, when the net migration rate turned from negative to positive. The in-migration to Poland was made up of three different flows: return migration, immigration from other EU countries and immigration from non-EU countries, notably Ukraine. For Romania, the trends over the decade show a different pattern: continuous high emigration with peaks of 230,000 to 240,000 in the years 2017–2019; and a constant profile of net emigration throughout the decade, with highs of -60,000 to -70,000 during the years 2015–2018. The in-migration flows to Romania are largely made up of returnees.

Table 1. Migration trends in Poland, Romania and all CEE11 countries 2011–2020

Year	Poland		Romania		CEE11	
	Emigration	Net migration	Emigration	Net migration	Emigration	Net migration
2011	265,798	-108,739	195,551	-47,866	649,333*	-232,383
2012	275,603	-58,057	170,186	-2,920	633,232	-101,093
2013	276,446	-56,135	161,755	-8,109	617,999	-92,563
2014	268,299	-46,024	172,871	-36,836	639,691	-101,884
2015	258,837	-40,690	194,718	-61,923	678,023	-132,767
2016	236,441	-28,139	207,578	-70,123	693,850	-127,528
2017	218,492	-9,139	242,193	-64,758	705,796	-84,045
2018	189,794	+24,289	231,661	-59,083	644,436	+39,738
2019	180,594	+46,055	233,736	-31,314	697,159	+109,920
2020	161,666	+48,949	186,818	-41,299	560,090	+116,417

Note: *Excluding Bulgaria.

Source: Authors' elaboration of Eurostat data.

Although geo-historical comparisons are often problematic, the experience of the CEE region in terms of migration transitions and turnarounds has some parallels with what happened in the Southern European countries a generation earlier (King, Fielding and Black 1997). Here the geopolitical transition was not the collapse of communism but the demise of fascist-military dictatorships in Portugal, Spain and Greece in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by accession to the European Community in its ‘southern enlargement’ in the 1980s. Italy had been a founder-member of the Common Market but its economic and migration profile resembled the other Southern European countries, transitioning from mass emigration during the 1950s and 1960s to substantial return migration following the oil crisis of 1973–1974 and then expanding immigration flows thereafter. Since the 1980s and accelerating during the 1990s and 2000s, Southern Europe has attracted large-scale immigration from many global source regions – North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, South and East Asia and Central and Eastern Europe. Within Europe, large East–South compass migrations took place, most notably from Romania to Spain and Italy. It remains to be seen whether the CEE experience will fully repeat what happened on the southern flank of Europe but some signs of similarity are already present.

‘Emigration to return’ and ‘emigration to immigration’ are essentially geographically based temporal trajectories which, in many countries, combine together to flip the balance from net out-migration to net in-migration. A more demographic sequence is found in this special issue’s third theme, which looks at children and other components of what Conway and Potter (2009) have termed the ‘next generations’ of migration. Following the pioneering volume of Assmuth, Hakkarainen, Lulle and Siim (2018), children are imbricated in the dynamics of migration in the CEE region in multiple ways: as children ‘left behind’ by their migrating parents; as children either taken abroad by their parents or born abroad to immigrant parents (the 1.5 and second generations); as youth and adolescents who ‘follow’ their already-migrated parents; and as children who are caught up in return migration when families decide to relocate to their ‘home’ countries. As we shall see in the papers that follow, the CEE region offers a fertile research terrain for studying the involvement of children in migration and migration’s impact on them.

Introducing the papers

The papers in this special collection are sequenced according to the three themes listed above (namely emigration to immigration, emigration to return migration and first-generation to post-migration generations), albeit some of the papers relate to more than one theme. The first paper, by *Anne White*, is based on her keynote lecture which opened the conference. She critiques the notion of compass migrations and opens up a window on the varieties of migration and mobility which are observable in the CEE region. She deploys the well-established concepts of transnationalism, mobility and integration to make sense of the complexities of contemporary migration, treating each of the three concepts as a continuum along which individual migrants can be located at discrete points in time depending, amongst other things, on their length of stay in the destination country and their stage in the life-cycle. Empirically, White draws on her ongoing interview-based research in Poland with two groups of migrants – Polish returnees and Ukrainian migrants – thereby addressing two of the migration transitions listed above, namely from emigration to immigration and from emigration to return migration. Her focus on Ukrainian migrants in Poland is a good example of the ‘East–East’ migrations emerging within the CEE region.

White uses the overarching concept of ‘migranhood’ to document how her two target groups talk about their experiences of ‘being a migrant’ and, in particular, to explore how their experiences and views are either shared or deviate between them. Using migranhood as both an existential condition and as a form of social identity (both self-identity and ascribed by others), opens up possibilities for an intersectional approach

incorporating social class, ethno-national origin, gender, age and citizenship, amongst others. White's overall empirical conclusion is suggestive of similar comparative research in other migratory and geographical contexts. She finds that, whilst returnee Poles can draw on their own experiences of migranthood to appreciate the migratory lives of Ukrainian immigrants in Poland, their empathy for them seemingly has its limits. It veers between a full understanding of shared transnational experiences and challenges on the one hand and, on the other, drawing hierarchical differences between themselves and the immigrant Ukrainians.

The next paper, by *Kseniya Homel*, fits directly into Theme 1, 'from emigration to immigration' and looks at the entrepreneurial experiences of Belarusian and Ukrainian women in Poland who specialise in the beauty and cosmetology sector. Homel's main theoretical stance is to view migrant entrepreneurship as a socially embedded practice. This is explored via in-depth interviews in which the author extracts narrative material relating to the participants' use of social networks in developing 'entrepreneurial agency'. The article can lay several claims to originality. First, it provides another example, alongside White's, of the emerging phenomenon of intra-CEE migration. Second, it focuses on female migrant entrepreneurs – an under-researched group in the literature on transnational migrants' businesses. Third, it employs a 'mixed embeddedness' approach (following Kloosterman and Rath 2001) to examine both the structural factors impacting on migrant entrepreneurial activity and the agentic role of migrants' social capital in developing business clienteles and in women's self-empowerment as specialists in the beauty sector. Fourth, it explores how the participants navigated the Covid-19 crisis, which closed down all beauty salons in Poland during April–May 2020; Homel's interviews were carried out later in 2020, after the salons had re-opened. Social relationships with other migrant women and with co-ethnic and Polish clients enabled the participants to ride out the enforced closure of their businesses. They used their expanding social networks to develop their businesses in two dimensions: moving their business from their apartments to commercial premises and expanding from the co-ethnic migrant market to catering to the 'mainstream' Polish clientele.

The third of the substantive papers – by *Davide Bertelli, Marta Bivand Erdal, Anatolie Coşciug, Angelina Kussy, Gabriella Mikiwicz, Kacper Szulecki and Corina Tulbure* – covers a broader remit. Ostensibly about the relationship between property ownership in migrants' home countries and their intentions to return there, it actually explores a wide range of (im)mobility practices beyond a simple return to base. Hence it links the 'fluid mobilities' of Theme 1 with Theme 2 on return. This article is also geographically wide-ranging, based on 80 interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants in Oslo and Barcelona. The paper poses and answers the question: How does transnational property ownership intersect with migrants' future mobility (and immobility) intentions? Two scenarios can be envisaged. One is that owning a property in the home country, often bought, built or enlarged from savings and remittances earned from working abroad, is an indication of a future commitment to return and live in that property. The authors call this the 'return hypothesis'. The second scenario is almost the reverse. Instead, the homeland property is seen as a 'second home' and as a base for visiting the home country; so, visiting substitutes for return. Bertelli *et al.* find evidence to support both scenarios, as well as other functions – for instance as a hedge against the forced need to return at some unforeseen future date or as an investment to be rented out.

In terms of take-away findings, the most important one is to challenge the 'return hypothesis'. Property ownership is not a predictor of return migration. Of the 32 participants who own property in Poland or Romania, 18 have no intention of returning, 7 have concrete plans to return and 7 are undecided. Another key finding is that most of the properties stand empty except for occasional use as a base for visits; only a few are rented out for an income. Nevertheless, the emotional resonance of these home-country properties is considerable – as a link to home and a kind of 'presence in absence', as well as being a signifier of a materially 'successful' migration. On the other hand, many interviewees stated their preference for property ownership in Barcelona or Oslo, as an investment for their future integration and long-term settlement there.

The next two papers are about return migration as reality rather than an intention. In the first of this pair, *Remus Gabriel Anghel, Ovidiu Oltean and Alina-Petronela Silian* explore the heterogeneity of return experiences in a small multi-ethnic town in central Romania, comparing the return outcomes of three groups: ethnic Romanians (the majority population), ethnic Germans and Roma. The authors cross-cut this triple inter-ethnic comparison with a threefold temporal sequence, looking at how returnees have been able to reintegrate socio-economically over the three post-socialist decades of the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s, each decade marked by a different stage in the economic evolution of the town.

The 1990s were a period of economic chaos in the wake of the post-socialist transition. It was a decade of emigration but of rather little return migration; yet, paradoxically, some of those who did return were successful in that they were able to invest their savings in a newly emerging market where property and business development costs were very low. Ethnic Germans were the main returnees in this period, often as seasonal returnees taking advantage of their enhanced social status and lucrative business opportunities. Emigration escalated during the 2000s, helped by easier access to EU destination countries, especially Spain, Italy, France and Germany. The town's economy, although still hampered by structural problems, was boosted by foreign investment and the growth of employment and business opportunities for returnees. Most emigrants and returning migrants in this decade were majority-ethnic Romanians, plus a very small number of Roma. Roma emigration and return grew rapidly in the 2010s, even if their livelihoods, both in migration and as returnees, were precarious compared to ethnic Romanians, who returned in larger numbers to take advantage of this decade's more prosperous economic context. The authors' findings demonstrate the continuing marginalisation and precarity of the town's Roma population, often reduced to temporary jobs in the informal sector abroad and with only minimal prospects of getting rewarding jobs upon return, owing to their low human and social capital and ongoing discrimination. By contrast, ethnic Romanian returnees became some of the most dynamic entrepreneurs within the town's revived economy.

The second paper devoted exclusively to return has a much narrower but no less interesting focus. *Anatolie Coşciug* writes on Romanian returnees who set up businesses in the transnational importation of used vehicles. Coşciug gives unique insights into this particular instance of transnational entrepreneurship, little researched but visible to any observant traveller on the motorways of Central Europe who notices the frequency of Romanian trucks with second-hand vehicles on board. Coşciug initially divides his 50-strong interview sample into two groups: those who become entrepreneurs because this is the only way to escape unemployment – 'necessity entrepreneurs' – and those who see and grasp the market potential for selling imported used cars in Romania – 'opportunity entrepreneurs'. This division is found to be too simplistic, as many individuals plying this trade do so for multiple motives, including a family history of business activity or experience with servicing and repairing vehicles, as well as other social-capital factors operating in both the host country and Romania.

This kind of research on specialised entrepreneurship which grows out of an experience of 'migranhood' (to use Anne White's favoured term) has great potential to be developed in other sectors. Moreover, the gender dimension should not pass unnoticed. Trading second-hand cars is overwhelmingly a male business and this offers a counterpoint to Homel's paper, summarised above, where the Ukrainian and Belarusian beauty-salon entrepreneurs in Poland are all migrant women.

The final group of papers focuses on children and youth, either as migrants or affected by the migration of their parents. Four papers investigate the positionality of children and adolescents in an instructive sequence: as children 'left behind' by their parents' migration; as adolescents who rejoin their already-migrated parents abroad; as second-generation youth growing up abroad but who then onward-migrate to another European country; and as children taken back with their parents when family return migration takes place.

The first article in this set, by *Georgiana Udrea and Gabriela Guiu*, focuses on the impact of parents' labour migration on the social, communication and educational experiences of left-behind children in Romania. The paper reflects the under-researched reality that one of the major consequences of the mass-scale emigration from Romania and other CEE countries is that large numbers of children are growing up without the irreplaceable support of one or both of their parents. The empirical base of the paper is 21 interviews with adolescents aged 16–18 in rural Oltenia, south-west Romania. The research is designed to answer three questions: (i) What are the adolescents' perceptions of the reasons why their parents emigrated? (ii) How do the youthful participants communicate and maintain relationships with others during their parents' absence? (iii) What are the perceived effects of parental migration on the children's school experience and performance?

Udrea and Guiu initially outline two outcomes of 'left-behindness'. The first is a set of negative experiences: loneliness, a sense of abandonment, poor communication skills, social marginalisation and demotivation to do well at school due to a lack of parental support and guidance. The second scenario posits more positive outcomes: better material standards fed by remittances, strong support from other family members (grand-parents, aunts and uncles etc.), enhanced agency to organise their lives, good motivation to self-educate and do well in school and a desire to repay the sacrifice of their parents. The balance between these two outcomes is seen to vary from one individual to another, dependent on a number of factors: the age of the child when parental migration took place, the gender of the child and, most important of all, whether the migration was of one or both parents and, if one, whether it was the father or the mother. The most problematic scenarios occur when the child was left behind at a young age (so they hardly 'know' their parents), when both parents migrated or when only the mother emigrated so the care and child-raising responsibilities are left in the hands of the father. All respondents appreciate the reasons behind their parents' migration – to improve the material standard of living of the family as a whole – but, when it comes to envisioning their own futures, they plan not to take the emigration path but aim to do well enough in their education to develop a career in Romania.

The next paper presents the logical sequence to the previous one. *Oksana Shmulyar Gréen, Charlotte Melander and Ingrid Höjer* study the migration of the CEE-born '1.5 generation' to Sweden to join their previously migrated parents there – and how these young people express their memories, feelings and connections to 'place'. Here the 1.5 generation are defined as foreign-born children who migrate to a new country before the age of 18. Due to their migration at a formative age, they are hypothesised to experience duality and possible confusion and conflict in their identities, social lives and attachment to place. Following Tyrrell, Sime, Kelly and McMellon (2019), their 'in-betweenness' is expressed across three dimensions: (i) between origin and destination country, (ii) between youth and adulthood and (iii) between the majority and their minority culture in the host society. Shmulyar Gréen *et al.* focus their analysis on place-making processes via an innovative methodology which involves two-stage qualitative interviews with 18 adolescents and young adults from Poland and Romania who immigrated to Sweden as children. This is combined with a visual component based on participants' drawings and photographs of places that hold 'meaning' for them.

The findings emphasise the importance of place-meaning for these young mobile people, who actively preserve their memories and ongoing connections to the distinctive places of their childhoods in Poland or Romania as well as demonstrating strong attachments to new post-migration localities in Sweden. Of the photographs and drawings produced for this research, roughly half show images from the homeland and half portray places in Sweden. The images are unique and personal, portraying 'everyday triviality' in the form of pictures of grandparents, dwellings, classrooms and schoolyards, streets and shopping malls, church and club gatherings and images of animals and nature – such as 'hay bales in a field'. Drawing on both the narrative and the visual evidence, the authors of this paper extract four salient themes for in-depth analysis: (i) nostalgic memories of care and love from the birth countries, (ii) places where participants feel at ease in their post-migration environment, (iii) images of micro-spaces of rooms and flats where they feel secure in terms of their work and

self-expression and (iv) places of exclusion and misrecognition, together with accounts of their strategies to deal with these more negative spaces.

The subsequent paper, by *Roberta Ricucci*, addresses a similar research question – ‘Where is my place?’ However, this time the question is applied to second-generation young adults of Eastern European parentage who have grown up in Italy and who then onward-migrate to another European country. Ricucci’s interviewees have immigrant parents from Albania, Romania, Ukraine and Moldova. Two-thirds (20 out of 30) of them have university degrees, the remainder high-school diplomas. Half were born in Italy, so are ‘true’ second-generation; the other half were born abroad and moved to Italy as children with their parents. Half the sample interviewed are already working abroad, mainly in Northern Europe, whilst the other half are actively contemplating migrating out of Italy to have better life and career choices. In terms of ‘compass migrations’, we observe in this case an East–South first-generation migration within Europe succeeded by a South–North migration of the second generation.

So, why do so many second-generation, CEE-origin young adults aspire to move abroad rather than try to advance their careers in Italy – which is, in a sense, their ‘home’ country and the country of their citizenship? The answer lies in two levels: first, in the overall difficulties for all young people in Italy to enter the qualified labour market. Second, there are extra challenges faced by people perceived to be of ‘foreign’ origin or as ‘the children of immigrants’, who are subject to various forms of exclusion and prejudice. Ricucci presents many troubling biographical accounts which demonstrate that teachers, professors and employers are not fully open to transparent, meritocratic principles of grading, hiring and promotion, due to negative perceptions of ‘Albanians’, ‘Romanians’ etc. It seems that Italy has yet to learn how to manage, let alone celebrate, ethnic and cultural diversity, despite the reality that, *de facto*, it has been a multicultural society for several decades. Moreover, getting a qualified job in Italy often depends on ‘who you know’ and on the ‘recommendations’ of friends, relatives and people who have ‘power’ and ‘connections’. Young people of immigrant background, whose parents perform humble jobs and are not well integrated into Italian society, often lack such personal connections to influential friends and networks.

The final paper in the collection brings together two of the conference’s nominated themes – on return migration and on children in migration. *Daina Grosa* presents a mixed-method study, combining an online survey of Latvian emigrants and returnees (N=6,000, including 2,000 returnees), with 67 in-depth interviews with returnee families, including children, in order to explore the relationship between imaginaries of return and the lived experiences of the return reality when it occurs. Return migration to Latvia, as elsewhere in CEE, has gathered pace in recent years, due to economic progress in the country. Many family decisions to return are also shaped by life-stage – e.g. the wish to bring up children in the Latvian educational and cultural environment or the need to look after ageing parents.

The special focus of the paper is on the experiences of children brought to Latvia when still of school age, having started their schooling abroad – typically in the UK, Ireland, Germany or Norway. Anxieties regarding the children’s ability to adapt to their new lives in the parental homeland mainly concern their lack of ‘academic’ fluency in the language, the different school curriculum, ‘Soviet-style’ methods of teaching and worries about bullying due to the children’s ‘different’ background. These anxieties – part of the imaginaries of return which either precede the move back or stop it from happening – are generally found to be exaggerated in practice, according to the narratives of family members and children who have returned. Nevertheless, the challenges are still real and need to be overcome, especially in the realm of language – key to success in school integration and beyond. For the children, pre-return preparation via language courses, diaspora schools and regular homeland visits are generally very helpful to ease the abrupt transition to living in what is, for them, a ‘new’ country. Grosa also surveys home-country government initiatives to support returnee and immigrant children and to train teachers in more inclusive modes of learning to recognise pupils’ heterogeneity of backgrounds.

Conclusion: avenues for further research

Migration is a vast, historically embedded and constantly evolving global phenomenon and, hence, a field of study which mixes established, tried-and-tested concepts and theories with new approaches and perspectives. Europe – and especially the CEE region – has generated ample evidence of new migration dynamics which subvert the compass migrations of South–North and East–West with new directionalities and modalities. This means that there are many opportunities for further research, some of which are signalled in the papers that follow, especially in their respective conclusions.

First, we pick up Anne White's intriguing notion of migranhood and ask what new forms of this condition of 'being a migrant' unfold in the CEE region and beyond. More open-ended and flexible than the fixed 'stay abroad or return home' intentions and actions of migrants in earlier times, new regimes of temporary, circular and onward migration open up new perspectives on integration, 'home', identity and belonging. In a changing EU space which, on the one hand, promotes internal migration within its free-movement borders and, on the other, erects barriers to those moving in from outside this favoured territory, how do needy migrants (whose labour is also needed) navigate the constraints of citizenship, visa and travel rules, such as the 90-day tourist/visitor limit designed to prevent long-term residence and the right to work?

Second, the papers in this collection make us realise how migration and mobility are phenomena which are fundamentally gendered and subject to generational positionalities within families. Men, women, children, grandparents and other age and life-stage cohorts experience migration – and are impacted by it – in different ways, depending on the family structures they are embedded in or detached from. This in turn leads to intersectional perspectives combining migranhood, gender and generation with 'race', ethnicity, class, citizenship and (lack of) wealth and privilege. All these intersectional combinations, which shift with mobility and over time, have great potential to be further explored.

This leads to a third dimension for further research and innovation – methods of collecting data. Most of the research reported in these papers is qualitative, based on interviews with participant samples of varying sizes, sometimes quite small. Expanding these samples, also into a comparative dimension, is one obvious avenue for further research. More imaginative are the initiatives undertaken by some of the authors to engage in mixed methods (e.g. Grosa's combination of a large-N online survey and a smaller-N round of in-depth interviews) or to explore visual methods of drawings and photographs as a tool to represent migrants' shifting attachments to 'place' (Shmulyar Gréen *et al.*).

Fourthly, we suggest that further research should be made into the relationship between migration and inequality in Europe and worldwide. True to our understanding of what constitutes a nexus, the migration–inequality nexus is recursive: migration is a product of inequality and migration itself generates new inequalities. The migration–inequality nexus is one of the big themes of migration which has yet to be investigated fully by migration (and other) researchers.⁴ Some of the papers in this special issue open up interesting debates within this nexus – for instance between different ethnic groups in return migration to Romania (Anghel *et al.*) and on shifting hierarchies of migrants (White) – but our view is that this aspect of migration studies, with its links to social, economic and spatial inequalities, is ripe for further research, especially of a quantitative nature.

Returning to the recent developments mentioned at the start of this introductory article – and especially Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine – we recognise that the papers included in this special issue capture mostly 'voluntary' forms of migration and mobility, however difficult it is to define voluntariness. Future research should therefore also pay attention to forced movements, as well as to changes in attitudes towards different migrants and their families following these events, whose implications are only starting to be felt more widely. Furthermore, this collection's focus, in some papers, on generations – and thus on histories of mobility – also points to avenues for future research. Whilst the horrors of war in Europe in

2022 force people to move in the present, so has war repeatedly forced people to move in earlier decades and centuries. Both now and throughout history, people have moved voluntarily and involuntarily due to famine, war, revolution and persecution. They have moved as a result of fear, poverty, hope, falling in love or a desire to secure the best chances for the next generation. Perhaps, by comparing human movements across history, we may understand better the migrations and mobilities of the present and the future.


Notes

1. MIRNet – Migration and Integration Research and Networking – is a ‘Twinning for Excellence’ project funded by the European Commission over the period 1 September 2019 to 28 February 2023 under the ‘Widespread’ programme. Partners in the consortium are Tallinn University in Estonia (the coordinating institution), the University of Sussex (UK), Roskilde University (Denmark) and the University of Tampere (Finland). The Sussex conference was the second international conference organised by MIRNet, the first having been held in Tallinn, 14–15 January 2021. Each of the two conferences is committed to producing a major publication. For the Sussex conference, it is this special issue; for the Tallinn event, it is an edited book currently in press (see Jakobson, King, Moroşanu and Vetik 2023).
2. The conference’s opening keynote lecture, by Anne White, was intriguingly titled ‘Migration without compass directions’ and set out to complicate, reverse and subvert the dominant European and global ‘compass migrations’ of East–West and South–North. A version of this keynote, with a different title, appears as the next paper in this special issue. For a more detailed exposition on compass migrations, see the International Organization for Migration’s 2013 edition of its *World Migration Report* (IOM 2013).
3. See Eurostat migr_imm8 and migr_emi2, accessed 3 November 2022.
4. Interestingly, ‘Migration and Inequality’ was the theme of the most recent SCMR/JEMS (Sussex Centre for Migration Research and *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*) annual conference, held at the University of Sussex, 19 October 2022. It is also the overarching theme of the next and 20th IMISCOE conference, to be held in Warsaw, 3–6 July 2023.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interests was reported by the authors.


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Mobility, Transnational and Integration Continuums as Components of the Migrant Experience: An Intersectional Polish-Ukrainian Case Study

Anne White*

Qualitative migration researchers today often use one or more of three concepts – mobility, transnationalism and integration – to make sense of the complexities of contemporary migrants’ lives. Collectively, researchers identify these as the three fundamental characteristics of migranhood. Being a migrant is about, for example, planning return visits, maintaining (or not maintaining) relations with people in the sending country or being preoccupied with learning to speak the receiving-society majority language. Qualitative interviewing suggests that each migrant is uniquely situated along various mobility, transnational and integration continuums. Migrants have many social identities as well as migranhood and the existence of these other, intersecting, social identities (such as social class, lifestage and gender) helps to determine their location on the continuums: for example, how often they are mobile and how much they can be mobile. The article draws on interviews in Poland with Ukrainians and Polish return migrants to show how (former) migrants conceptualise shared Ukrainian-Polish migranhood along these three continuums.

Keywords: migranhood, Polish migration transition, Ukrainians, transnationalism, integration, intersectionality

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Introduction and theoretical background

This article discusses the issue of what constitutes the common migrant identity of people on the move, regardless of their countries of origin and destination. Specific sending- and receiving-country pairings are often fundamentally important for determining how individuals experience migration and it is essential not to overgeneralise and make unwarranted assumptions about one group of migrants based on information about another group. However, to understand individual experiences of migration it is helpful, based on careful empirical research, to identify similarities as well as differences between migrant experiences.

An interest in understanding commonalities no doubt lies behind a great deal of qualitative migration research – including comparative research – yet there remains a need to probe further into how being a migrant combines with other identities. This article suggests some ideas about how to do this, and is thus partly methodological in focus. The first part approaches the question on a theoretical level, referring to the phenomena of mobility, transnationalism and integration as key components of what I call ‘migranhood’. Qualitative researchers tend to investigate the mobility, transnationalism and integration of specific nationalities; for example, the transnational practices and return intentions of Senegalese or Ukrainian migrants. No doubt often unintentionally, they seem to privilege nationality/ethnicity as a kind of independent variable or master identity. Scholars such as Anthias (2012) have argued convincingly against over-ethnicising. It would be better to adjust our perspective and see nationality/ethnicity as one of a bundle of identities, one which is often significant but not necessarily fundamental to a person’s decision to settle or return, and their experience of being a migrant. Conversely, it is always useful to determine where a migrant is located on mobility, transnational and integration ‘continuums’. This is the essence of being a migrant. Nationality/ethnicity can play a role in determining such locations, but so do other social identities such as gender or age.

The first part of the article explores this thought in more detail, with illustrations from my own research. Since it is always good to check abstract ideas against evidence about what actual migrants think, do and say, the second part of the article digs further into my research findings to discuss how research participants talked about what it meant to be migrant, in terms of mobility, transnationalism and integration. Of course they usually did so without using those terms. This section is based on my research in Poland in 2019–2022 with Polish return migrants and Ukrainians. In the course of the interviews, many participants compared Polish and Ukrainian migration. As their accounts of their own lives demonstrated, Polish and Ukrainian migration does indeed share many common features, so there were numerous parallels interviewees could have drawn. However, interviewees chose to highlight some similarities rather than others. This is discussed – with reference to mobility, transnationalism and integration – in the final section of the article.

A refugee, an international student and a seasonal fruitpicker are different types of migrant. Yet they share some things in common – more than simply the fact that they moved from Place A to Place B for a certain minimum time period, as in dictionary definitions of migration. Migranhood refers not just to a past action of moving geographically; it is also an ongoing social identity. Like other identities, it is double-sided, consisting of both the self-identity of individual migrants and those identities ascribed to them by others (Pierik 2004). Social identities evolve over time and are affected not just by an individual’s personal experiences but also by political and economic developments; for recent Polish and Ukrainian migrants, these include processes such as Brexit, or Russia’s 2022 war in Ukraine.

There are several reasons to try to distil the essence of migranhood, or ‘migrantness’, to use the term preferred by some scholars (for example, Mas Giralt 2020). Firstly, thinking about what constitutes migranhood helps make sense of the complexity of migration trends in the contemporary world. Secondly, it helps qualitative researchers understand individual interviewees ‘in the round’, without resorting to typologies. By isolating migranhood as a type of social identity, one can use an intersectional approach to understand how

it combines with other identities to lead to different trajectories and outcomes for different migrating individuals. Too often, the concepts of ‘migrant’ and ‘ethnic’ are muddled together but – as illustrated by the fact that internal migration often lacks an ethnic component – migranhood is a separate analytical category. As mentioned above, depending on the context, there are many other potentially relevant identities which intersect with migranhood – i.e. which help to determine where an individual will lie on the various mobility, transnational and integration continuums. These identities include social class, age and lifestage, gender and citizenship, as well as whether someone is regarded as ‘Eastern’ or ‘Western’ European or from the global South.

There exist many such identities, since migrant populations are frequently socio-demographically diverse. As predictable from network theory, migration becomes less selective over time, as more children and poorer and/or older people decide to migrate. This process can happen over just a few years in the case of countries such as Poland or Romania after they acceded to the EU. Ukrainian labour, family and educational migration to Poland in the years immediately preceding 2022 presents a similar picture of diversification (Górny, Kołodziejczyk, Madej and Kaczmarczyk 2019). Migration becomes regarded as a relatively risk-free livelihood strategy, partly because 21st-century social networks work efficiently and living abroad can be combined with maintaining active connections with sending countries (White 2016). Hence some migrants have a sense of ‘easy transnationalism’ (King, Lulle, Parutis and Saar 2018). Qualitative and quantitative research demonstrates the multicausality of this migration by many types of people within Europe (King and Okólski 2019: 20).

It might be objected that EU citizens who move in the EU are not suitable topics for an article about migranhood, since they are not really migrants. It is convenient for the EU to distinguish between mobile EU citizens and third-country ‘migrants’, but this is not just a matter of convenience, since the label ‘mobile’ is often apt. Many EU migrants, especially professionals, students and lifestyle migrants from Western Europe, move easily and frequently. Moreover, the EU’s approach that being mobile precludes being labelled a ‘migrant’ does have a basis in popular assumptions. These particular migrants are so privileged in various respects that they are often not regarded as migrants, either by others or even by themselves. Some studies focus on their high degree of agency (Koikkalainen 2013). However, much research shows that they do feel their migranhood, however ‘lightly’, for example when they experience obstacles adapting to life in another country (Ryan and Mulholland 2014; Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels 2019). In other words, they are still migrants, even if migrants ‘light’, in the words of a Swedish professional migrant quoted by Wallinder (2019: 42). Moreover, migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – even those who are similar in most respects to their West European or Nordic counterparts and who could also qualify as ‘migrants light’ – find it particularly hard to avoid being ascribed the migrant label (Bulat 2019). In the UK since the Brexit referendum even West Europeans have begun to have this experience (Mas Giral 2020). It therefore seems artificial to exclude EU citizens from an analysis of migranhood and this article uses the term ‘migrant’ to cover all people who cross administrative boundaries. It has a particular focus on Europe.

The empirical study

Although the first part of the article considers migranhood theoretically and methodologically, I illustrate some points with examples from my recent research among migrants in Poland – both Polish return migrants and people from other countries. This article focuses particularly on the Ukrainians in my sample. One of the project’s research questions concerned whether and, if so, how, Poles’ own migration experience (both knowledge and emotions) coloured their views of migration to Poland and how this, in turn, influenced the experiences of non-Poles living there and their thoughts about whether to settle in Poland. The second, more empirical part of the article looks at migranhood ‘from below’, considering some informants’ thoughts about

their shared migrant identities regarding mobility, transnationalism and integration. Of course, I am not arguing that Poles' own migration experience is the only factor shaping their attitudes to foreigners arriving in Poland.

Before the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in 2022, Poland had already become a major receiving country, thanks to recent labour, family and educational migration from Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union. Although most Ukrainians were temporary migrants (over one million in 2018) they also displayed an increasing tendency to settle in Poland (Górny *et al.* 2019). The 2021 Polish census showed an increased number of Ukrainians living permanently in Poland (Statistics Poland 2022).

In order to understand the return or settlement intentions of Ukrainians and other foreigners, I compared the experiences and opinions of people living in specific places: three medium-sized cities each with a population of around 100,000. These were Płock (interviews carried out in 2019), Kalisz (2021) and Piła (2022). One aspect of Poland's migration transition is that migrants fanned out and began to settle beyond the largest cities (Górny *et al.* 2019). Medium-sized and smaller cities were therefore also beginning to adapt to their presence. The aim was not to discover some 'average' Poland, but simply to understand different local factors which led to different experiences for migrants. For example, the fact that all three cities were regarded by Ukrainians and Poles alike as good places to bring up children helps explain the tendency towards Ukrainian family reunification in precisely such cities. The availability of factory work in the cities brought Ukrainians into contact with working-class Polish circular and return migrants. Of my 124 interviewees, 70 were Ukrainians, reflecting the fact that Ukrainians constituted by far the largest group of foreigners resident in Poland even before the 2022 refugees' arrival.¹ The 37 Poles in my sample possessed different socio-demographic characteristics and had a variety of integration experiences abroad; the returnees had been back in Poland for different lengths of time and a handful were circular migrants whom I interviewed during their temporary returns to Poland. The research received ethics permission from University College London Research Ethics Committee. I analysed the transcripts thematically.

My interviewees knew that I was writing a book provisionally titled *Poland as a Country of 'Immigration' and 'Emigration'*, so it was natural that some came to the interview having thought about how the two identities interconnected. However, I did not ask directly for their views on interconnections and the interviews began with the interviewees' own migration stories. Some spontaneously dropped comments about shared migranhood into these narratives, a phenomenon also noted by other Polish migration researchers (for example, Mayblin *et al.* 2016: 68). In many cases, however, the interviewees became engrossed in recounting their personal experiences and there seemed a danger that the conversation might never touch on interconnections. To nudge them into reflection, I would take advantage of a natural pause to observe (to Ukrainian participants) that 'Poles also go abroad to work', 'Do you know any Poles who worked abroad?' or, to Poles, 'There are more foreigners in Poland nowadays'. If they did not have much to say in response to these prompts I would not press the topic.

Polish opinion polls show that most Poles do not object to foreigners coming to work in Poland (Duszczyk 2021; White, Grabowska, Kaczmarczyk and Slany 2018: 38). Moreover, surveys suggest that, with the exception of the far right, most Poles are reasonably well-disposed towards Ukrainians (Omyła-Rudzka 2022), as demonstrated by the solidarity expressed by Poles towards Ukrainians after the 2022 Russian invasion. Nonetheless, in everyday life, Ukrainians in Poland can feel that, despite assumptions on both sides about cultural proximity, they are often not fully accepted and are 'neither strangers nor the same' (Grzymała-Kazłowska and Brzozowska 2017).

Studies of how far empathy is present in the attitudes of traditional sending societies towards new migrant populations present a mixed picture. Glynn (2011) argues that, when Ireland and Italy became countries with net immigration, the Irish displayed more empathy towards new arrivals than did the Italians. He suggests that this was because, in Ireland, more parallels had been drawn publicly between Irish migrants and new migrants

whereas, in Italy, a more patronising and less empathetic approach prevailed. Feischmidt and Zakariás (2020) suggest that Hungarians who went as refugees to Germany during the Cold War were more likely to empathise with refugees from other countries during the 2015 ‘migration crisis’, whereas the solidarity shown by more-recent Hungarian migrants was more a statement of opposition to Orbán’s regime. In my own research, I was not seeking out instances of empathy as such; rather than uncovering positive emotions towards foreigners, I was interested in whether Poles could see connections between their own and others’ migration, and were able to see the world partly from the others’ perspective.

Mobility, transnationalism and integration as key components of migranthood

Mobility and transnationalism are among the concepts most often used by contemporary migration researchers. Since the mobility and transnational turns in migration scholarship (Botterill 2011; Faist 2013; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Vertovec 2001), qualitative researchers seem to agree that the terms are relevant to the lives of many migrants. They therefore help us understand what makes a migrant a migrant: the characteristics all migrants share. Nonetheless, scholars also agree that some migrants are more mobile and transnational than others. In other words, they are located at different places on mobility and transnational continuums. This understanding underpins some well-known recent typologies of Central and East European migrants (Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich 2007; Engbersen, Grabowska-Lusinska, Leerkes, Snel and Burgers 2013). However, since mobility and transnationalism are broad terms, it is helpful to consider sub-sets within each concept and think of migrants as being located on numerous types of mobility and transnational continuums. They can be less/more geographically mobile, less/more frequently mobile, less/more prone to make transnational comparisons, have weaker/stronger transnational social relations, engage in fewer/more transnational practices and possess weaker/stronger transnational identities. The continuums could also be conceptualised as trajectories, on which migrants move both forward and backwards over time.

The multitude of potential continuums makes it impossible to construct neat typologies. In addition, I am not suggesting that one should try to measure exactly where research participants are located on each of the continuums. Nonetheless, for me as a qualitative researcher, thinking about these continuums and trajectories is a useful exercise, serving a checklist for understanding individual cases and interpreting specific in-depth interviews. This can be illustrated with the case of Tomasz, who had returned to Poland from working in a Nordic country, and Yuliya, a Ukrainian teaching assistant who had decided to settle in Poland with her husband and child. Tomasz commented:

I quickly realised that living abroad for a longer period wasn’t for me. And deciding [to return to Poland] was the best decision of my life. I’d happily go back for two or three days to the little town where I was in [country name] to show my fiancée where I worked, what I did in the forest. Although I know that she’d just say ‘Oh, a forest. OK. We have forests in Poland too’. Because there was nothing special there.

Tomasz’ migration behaviour – his return decision – can be largely explained by his limited geographical mobility and consistently strong transnational ties. The two years he spent working abroad, in a single location, were his only migration experience, and as a very young person. Since he did not enjoy it, he drew the conclusion that migration was not for him, and returned to Poland permanently. He felt alienated from the middle-aged, hard-drinking, long-term Polish migrants alongside whom he worked. His family and friends had remained in Poland, and these transnational relations – intensified by frequent visits home – were much stronger than any ties in the destination country, although Tomasz also complained that it was impossible to build a long-distance romantic relationship under the circumstances. His mobility and transnational practices

were also intense: he often flew back to Poland for visits. Moreover, he lived and worked with Poles and spoke Polish. He displayed no sense of having acquired any transnational identity, in the sense of dual identification with both receiving and sending countries, and was not attached to where he lived abroad. It is difficult to understand his decision to return to Poland – which remained always his only ‘home’ – without taking all these factors into account.

One aspect of migranthood is that migrants are people who can draw comparisons between the different places in which they have lived. They are wiser than stayers (in the sense that they have knowledge based on experience) because they can invoke transnational points of comparison. This is not to say that they are always objective; their particular experiences in migration as well as different aspects of their identities help to shape their comparisons. Although not all scholars of transnational practices include drawing comparisons as a transnational practice, social remittances researchers (for example Grabowska and Garapich 2016; Levitt 2001) have analysed exactly how migrants see the world through this comparative, transnational lens. Yuliya, a teaching assistant, was a textbook case of migrant conversion to receiving-country norms:

I found out that [in Poland] it's not allowed, for example at a parents' evening the teacher will never discuss your child with someone else or in their presence. Only with you separately. And no one else has the right to know. But in Ukraine it's still the case that, at parents' evenings, the teacher sits down with all the parents in the class and she can complain that some child is being naughty and everyone hears it. Now, I find that totally uncivilised.

Unlike Tomasz, for whom the foreign country was ‘nothing special’, Yuliya was fast adopting a transnational Polish-Ukrainian identity, which contributed to her desire to settle. She had travelled in Poland and wanted to travel more. Although she maintained transnational ties with Ukraine, rather than tugging her back, these sustained relationships seemed to help her feel more comfortable in Poland. She even continued to study Polish with a teacher based in her home town. As in the case of Tomasz, Yuliya’s perspectives on returning or settling can be explained with reference to different aspects of her mobility and transnationalism.

However, it is also useful to apply a third concept, integration. Yuliya’s conversion to Polish pedagogical ethics can be seen as an aspect of her integration into Polish society, as parent and teacher. Integration is the third of the triad of concepts without which it is hard to understand migrant experiences. The term refers to migrants becoming full members of the receiving society, something which many migrants themselves would conceptualise as ‘settling in’. Although it has been critiqued by a number of scholars, the concept of integration is a helpful analytical tool as long as it is sufficiently precisely defined and if it is understood to be a process involving both the receiving society and the migrants themselves. Ager and Strang’s framework of 10 ‘domains of integration’ (2008: 170)² provides a basis for understanding each migrant’s intersecting integration journeys through various domains / along various continuums: rights and citizenship; language and cultural knowledge; safety and stability; social bridges, bonds and links; employment, education, housing and health. Ager and Strang also highlight the importance for migrants of feeling ‘accepted’. Yuliya enjoyed friendly relations with Polish colleagues and neighbours in the city, and her determination to settle in Poland was based on a level of integration which gave her excellent insights into Polish society, underpinned by a tendency to draw transnational comparisons in Poland’s favour. By contrast, Tomasz’s decision to return, based on his isolation and loneliness in the Scandinavian forest, cannot be understood without reference to his poor integration in various domains: his weak social ties in the receiving country, poor living conditions and difficult, dangerous and dirty job, as well as his impression that local people looked down their noses at Poles.

The different continuums coexist and mutually influence each other in complex ways: as a number of scholars have observed, it is not the case that, for example, there is a simple zero-sum relationship ‘more

transnationalism = less integration' (Carling and Pettersen 2014; Snel, Engbersen and Leerkes 2006). Of course, much depends on how integration is defined. One aspect of integration which is essential to understand is that migrants integrate into different social locations within the receiving country. Fox and Mogilnicka (2019) touch on this with their concept of 'pathological integration', referring to the process whereby migrants who live in environments abroad where they mix with racists pick up racist attitudes themselves. In other words, Polish return migrants who have integrated into such settings in the receiving society may be predisposed to ignore commonalities between themselves and foreigners in Poland. A number of recent studies (e.g. Gawlewicz 2015; Nowicka and Krzyżowski 2017; Rzepnikowska 2019; White 2018) have investigated Polish migrants' reactions to racial diversity abroad and the reasons why some migrants become (more) racist while others are more open to difference. It is clear that exactly where migrants integrate plays an important role, particularly the levels of equality, non-discrimination and trust specific to certain workplaces, institutions and localities. My Polish interviewee, Jan, a musician, was an example of someone who had become more open as a result of his social contacts abroad. He had lived in the UK at a time of 'continuous news coverage about terrorist attacks' but 'never encountered anything like that in everyday life'. His directly opposite experiences – including a Muslim becoming his closest friend – led him to question the framing of Muslims as terrorists. As discussed below, the majority of my Ukrainian interviewees worked in factories (typical Ukrainian workplaces outside the biggest cities) and these specific social environments created a special kind of integration into a Polish working-class world where temporary migration was a taken-for-granted livelihood strategy.

To conclude this section on the triad of concepts: when defining migranthood as a social identity, it is helpful to understand migrants as people to whom – even if they do not use the terms – mobility, transnationalism and integration are of central importance. This includes their capacity to progress to a satisfactory point along each trajectory. One has to ask, for example, how much integration is sufficient in a certain domain for a migrant to 'operate confidently' in the receiving society (Ager and Strang 2004). Often the researcher needs to investigate not just the migrant's actual level of mobility, etc., but also his or her ability to be sufficiently geographically/frequently mobile (Kaufman, Bergman and Joye 2014), form strong transnational social relations, make transnational comparisons, engage in transnational practices, form transnational identities and so forth.

This begs the question of what conditions the migrants' capacities and hence their location on various continuums. This is where their other intersecting identities need taking into account. Intersectionality is a way of looking at phenomena, such as migrants and migration, based on the understanding that people have bundles of different 'intersecting' identities. Without this level of detail, it is hard to understand migrants' behaviour (Bastia 2014). For example, Jan's identity as a musician open to meeting other musicians of whatever race and background, Yuliya's as a parent and university graduate or Tomasz's youthful inexperience and sense of alienation from his middle-aged co-workers help explain how they reacted to situations they encountered and how this shaped their mobility decisions, transnationalism and integration. However, the term intersectionality is often used not only to identify combinations of different identities but also to understand the benefits and disadvantages which these combinations confer (McCall 2005), particularly the extent to which individuals possess agency. In the context of my article, agency refers to migrants' capacity to be mobile, lead transnational lives and integrate successfully on multiple dimensions.

Since the discussion thus far has been about continuums or journeys, it is relevant to discuss their endpoints. After a migrant has lived in the new country for several years, memories of the act of migrating may lose some significance and, in their everyday lives, the erstwhile 'migrants' may be much more focused on their new identities as residents, particularly if they integrate in all of Ager and Strang's domains, becoming citizens and feeling accepted as new members of the receiving society. Such outcomes are particularly likely for 'immigrants light' who have integration headstarts – privileges such as EU citizenship or whiteness. Losing

their migranhood also depends on their becoming less like a migrant in the sense that they are less mobile and transnational than previously. When someone loses most of their transnational ties and no longer travels to their country of origin, they personally may no longer feel like a migrant, particularly if they were not a forced migrant.

However, the former migrant is not the only one to have opinions about their migranhood. A migrant may cease to self-identify as such, even without using the word, in the sense that they no longer think of themselves consciously as being mobile, transnational and integrating (again, probably without using those concepts). Other people, both members of the majority population and co-nationals, may disagree. They have their own understandings of migranhood, often based on stereotypes and assumptions about migranhood as a collective identity, and frequently racialised. They may see someone as a migrant long after the individual ceases to feel his/her migranhood; indeed, as the literature on ‘second-generation migrants’ shows, the children of migrants can find it impossible to escape the label (Beaman 2017), a plight also experienced by West European migrants in UK post-Brexit referendum (Mas Giralt 2020).

Members of the receiving society ascribe identities to migrants in contradictory ways. When members of receiving societies highlight and exaggerate otherness, this links to deep-rooted suspicions about non-settled people (Anderson 2013) and to snobbish assumptions that mobile people are poorly educated labour migrants (Bulat 2019). Assumptions that poverty and low levels of education are components of migranhood also link to the stereotypes about ‘East European backwardness’ held not only by Western Europeans about all of CEE but also by Central Europeans about Ukrainians and Russians. Ethnic hierarchisation is a widespread habit among members of receiving societies (Ford 2011). It can also characterise sending countries, as evidenced by regular Polish opinion polls on attitudes towards different nationalities, dating back to 1993, long before Poland became a receiving country (Omyła-Rudzka 2022). Qualitative studies by, for example, Andrejuk (2017), Jaskulowski (2019) and Narkowicz and Pędziwiatr (2017) explore the complexities of evolving ethnic hierarchy construction in Poland. However, locals can also underestimate otherness. This attitude lies behind assumptions that an EU professional person, student or lifestyle migrant working in another EU country will have no problems integrating; therefore, no integration provision is made for them (Collett 2013). It also guides assumptions that shared racial identity is a recipe for integration success. Poles, for example, often assume Ukrainians in Poland will ‘integrate’ because the two nationalities are supposedly ‘culturally close’.

Finally, relevant actors include not just the migrant and the receiving population but also the migrant’s co-nationals. Identities are co-constructed by co-nationals in both societies – for example, a Lithuanian living in the UK may have to reckon with opinions regarding Lithuanian migrants both in Lithuania itself and among Lithuanians living in the UK. However, a hallmark of EU migrants – as is also true of Ukrainian migrants in Poland – is that they tend to see their migration as an individual or family project. In normal circumstances (i.e. before Putin’s invasion of Ukraine) they often seem to lack a sense of collective responsibility towards their sending towns and villages. Hence the transnational aspect of their migranhood is fundamentally different from that of many migrants on other continents – as described, for example, by Levitt (2001) in *The Transnational Villagers*. Assumptions that migrants necessarily belong to a (singular) diaspora or community abroad, which could assert social control over their behaviour, are usually fallacious. Migrants can be selective about their associates – particularly when there exist large and socially heterogeneous populations of co-nationals in the receiving country – and sometimes engage in energetic ‘othering’ of their co-nationals (Garapich 2016).

Shared Ukrainian and Polish migranthood as viewed by (former) migrants

This section adopts a bottom-up perspective, discussing how the participants in my research project talked comparatively about Ukrainian and Polish migration. Perhaps partly because they knew my project was about migration in general, not just Ukrainian migration, the Poles rarely talked about supposed national characteristics of Ukrainians, except to observe that Ukrainian and Polish were cognate languages and that it was comparatively straightforward for Ukrainians to understand and learn to speak Polish. On the other hand, both groups did refer to certain types of mobility, transnationalism and integration. Comments about mobility tended to be neutral; observations concerning transnational ties and integration were more emotionally charged. It should be noted that the opinions of three groups are discussed in this section: my Ukrainian and Polish interviewees, but also the Ukrainians' Polish acquaintances who had worked abroad and/or had family and friends in foreign countries. Some knew a diverse collection of people – for example, because they were married to Poles or were friendly with parents at their child's school or worked in beauty and hairdressing salons. In the latter case, their clients included Polish migrants who were settled abroad but were visiting their city of origin during the holidays. Ukrainian factory workers' networks were mainly Ukrainian, but they also worked alongside Polish returnees and circular migrants.

Polish and Ukrainian interviewees, of all ages and backgrounds, shared a view of a world in motion. Wage differentials in different countries were presented as the main drivers of migration and migration was therefore a fact of life – mobility was completely normalised. Among the Ukrainians, for example, Klara remarked 'It's normal. You can earn more there [in Western Europe]. Poles don't like it here in Poland so they go there. It's better there. And we don't like it in Ukraine so we come here'. Emma reflected 'They [Poles] go to Germany, or to other cities.... If he thinks he needs to go because the money he gets here isn't enough, and he goes abroad, I think he's doing the right thing. Because he is just the same as we are'. Poles made similar observations. Anita, for instance, referring to the demand for seasonal agricultural labour, observed that 'If someone, for example, grows tomatoes or apples, people will come from Ukraine, like we went from Poland to England. In Poland they earn three times what they could in Ukraine. It's exactly the same principle.'

Although most interviewees – especially poorer people for whom migration was a necessary livelihood strategy – referred to such migrations as ever-present and ongoing, several Polish interviewees, who had participated in the post-2004 wave of migration of young, well-educated city people to the UK and Ireland, referred to waves and situated their comparisons historically. For example, Mateusz commented (in a neutral tone) about Ukrainians:

They're having a hard time at the moment, because their economy is in trouble as a result of the war, and they are going through what we experienced 12–15 years ago. They are at that stage. They graduate from university but there is nowhere for them to work in their own country.

On the other hand, the belief that it is 'natural' for people to migrate from poorer to richer countries suggests an economic hierarchy, Western Europe–Poland–Ukraine, which is reinforced by orientalist assumptions and can prompt Poles to be condescending towards Ukrainians. This was noted by Tomasz:

I don't know if they can spot it, but we look at them a bit differently, because they come here to work. We complain about how bad things are here that we need to go abroad to work. And if someone comes from another country to work in Poland, that country must be really, really bad.

Another common theme concerned transnational ties, especially maintaining relationships with loved ones in the sending country, and feelings of missing home. Ukrainian interviewees claimed that Poles returned from abroad because of the strength of their family feelings. They also often knew Poles who currently had family members abroad. Hence they were able to commiserate together. Tamara reported:

One Polish woman I know has children who went to England and stayed. They went to work and stayed. She's here and her children are there. So this is the conversation:

'How are you?'

'But how are you? Your own mother stayed in Ukraine. Do you feel miserable?'

I say, 'Yes, I am miserable'.

She says 'I can't bear it. I miss my grandchildren so badly' ...

[I say] 'Every day I think about my mother, I talk to her every day, do you do the same? Don't be sad, it's OK. They have their own life there'.

Other interviewees also picked up on the theme of migrants' transnational communications. Krystyna, a Polish circular migrant, complained about other Polish people who expressed surprise that refugees from countries like Syria and Iraq trying to cross the Belarusian border had mobile phones, and who assumed that Ukrainians, too, were technologically backward. She pointed out that, when she went to work in Germany, she always took her phone and laptop and that these were essential for all migrants to keep connected with people back in their origin countries.

On the other hand, it seemed from some of the Ukrainian interviews that Polish return migrants, recollecting how they had missed home while they were abroad, could be distinctly insensitive. They seemed to feel that they had reached the end of their life in mobility and this could lead to a tendency to emphasise that home was best, as reported by Tamara.

My circle of acquaintances is... at work, and from walking my dog, it's lots of Poles. They know I'm from Ukraine, they hear my accent, and they say things like 'I was in Germany, I worked there for two years' or 'I went to pick blueberries in Holland' or 'I did this and that'. They say 'Tamara, there's no place like home'. I say 'Yes'.

In the interview, Tamara said the word 'Yes' in a doubting tone, suggesting that she did not agree with her interlocutors. Her Polish acquaintances' generalising verdict on migration – that the best place for a migrant was at home – was tactless, given that the Ukrainians they knew in Poland were not 'at home' in the sense of being in their country of origin. They were located on various mobility trajectories: in some cases, hoping eventually but not yet able to return to Ukraine; in others, halfway to Western Europe; and, in many cases, trying to build a new 'home' in Poland. Three of my interviewees – including Tamara – were from war zones (even before the 2022 invasion), so it was impossible to return.

With regard to integration, the comparisons made by interviewees tended to refer to migrants' drudgery – leaving them little time for integration, language learning or their reception by the receiving society. Anzhela, who complained about her own bad experiences of working conditions and gender discrimination in her Polish factory, also commented on her Polish co-workers:

I've not heard them say anything good [about their lives abroad]. They complain that they had to work a huge amount. I hear comments like 'You came to Poland, and you work. When we went abroad, we worked 12 hours a day. We lived in really bad conditions'. And they sort of say 'Now it's your turn'. That's

what I sometimes hear. Because, when you go away, you leave your family and try to work flat out. Well, how can they say good things? That they worked non-stop? That's usually how it is. I've yet to hear that someone went abroad and had a good time. They go and work hard. So that they can come back to Poland and be with their families.

It would not be surprising to encounter more negativity about migration among Poles who had worked long hours abroad without much opportunity to enjoy life in the foreign country; Ukrainian interviewees like Anzhela, with her own limited options, could appreciate this point of view. On the other hand, Anzhela's own lowly position in the factory also meant that she was more likely to associate with such negative returnees. By contrast, Ostap, a Ukrainian man from the same factory with a higher-status job, working alongside Polish men on an equal basis, reported on their experiences in the same positive terms as his own. 'Some [colleagues] worked abroad for five, some for ten years but then they came back. [They say] it was interesting being abroad – their work, their new friends'.

In my interviews with migrants over the years, the aspect of the integration process most often mentioned – sometimes referred to as 'fundamental' – was language acquisition. Several Ukrainians – often having dwelled at length on their own attempts to improve their Polish language – mentioned that Poles of their acquaintance had not learned receiving-country languages. It seems that sometimes this experience led to Poles expecting Ukrainians not to be able to speak Polish. Tamara, for example, reported how a Polish contact, a former seasonal worker, assumed that being a migrant implied not feeling at home because of not understanding the local language. 'A woman was telling me [in Polish] about how she went to pick blueberries. "Tamara, I understand how hard it is for you. You don't understand the language". "But I do understand!" "Home is home. There's no place like home"'.

Many Polish interviewees were conscious of anti-migrant sentiments and, in some cases, pointed out that these were not just their own experiences but could be encountered by migrants in different countries. Sometimes they referred to actual discrimination. Jolanta, for example, a Polish seasonal migrant, described how her friend in the Netherlands

was on the street where she lived... and someone told her to cross to the other side because she was a Pole. They said 'You should be over there'. Well, what do you think of that, you do find unpleasant types, don't you? In Poland various stuff happens as well. [Slightly lowering her voice] They don't like Turks. Lots of [bad] things happen. My view is that you have to understand why a person came. Like Ukrainians, Belarusians, they come to us because they can earn more money.

However, other interviewees described a milder experience. They remembered migration as a state of feeling conspicuous, guessing at the vibes around them and worrying about possible unstated hostility emanating from local people. Janusz had been a manual worker in Ireland:

Janusz: *When I happen to notice [people speaking Ukrainian] in the shops then I always think about how I was in Ireland and used to do my shopping in Aldi. I'd be there, for example, with my friend and we'd be speaking Polish but I'd be conscious of how people standing behind me in the queue were feeling.*

Anne: *How do they feel?*

Janusz: *Oh, I don't know. Like 'Oh, they're Ukrainians, they've come here to work'. 'Oh. Poles. They've come here to work'.*

The interviews therefore demonstrated that – in certain respects – both Poles and Ukrainians were able to see connections between themselves and the other group. However, as the above quotations also illustrate, in some cases the Poles apparently overgeneralised and imagined similarities which were not actually present. In some cases, they could appear to be unsympathetic or tactless. As one would expect, both from evidence about other receiving societies and from research on the (in)tolerance displayed by Poles when they themselves were living abroad, as discussed above, some Polish return migrants find it harder than others to see connections between themselves and migrants from other countries. The quotations above suggest that less sympathetic attitudes might particularly characterise some Poles who had not engaged very much with the receiving country while they were abroad and had less meaningful contact with locals.

However, several Ukrainian interviewees expressed the view that the capacity to see connections depended on the individual. Nikolai, a Ukrainian builder, commented that ‘not every Pole will admit that, abroad, he’s exactly the same as we are here’. Melaniya, who worked in an office alongside several Polish returnees, remarked:

You’d suppose that Poles who’d worked in different countries, like England or Germany, or Norway, would understand other migrants better. But actually, it depends on the person. There are people whose experiences remain just their own experiences and they don’t see parallels with migrants who are here in Poland... The fact that people migrate to Poland from different countries is seen in an abstract way, it’s compartmentalised, so they still think they are superior to the immigrants... On the other hand, there are people who say ‘We understand you, we were in the same situation ourselves’.

Conclusion

To read about and conduct research on migration is to be constantly struck by parallels between the experiences of people across the globe, regardless of their national identity and countries of origin and destination. At the same time, of course, the deeper the researcher probes, the more they appreciate both the significance of those inequalities which usually characterise sending- and receiving-country relationships and the uniqueness of each migrant’s story. This article has suggested an approach towards understanding some common aspects of migranthood while eschewing over-generalisation.

I have argued that there is a good reason why transnationalism, mobility and integration are concepts widely used by migration researchers, since they are relevant to the lives of almost all migrants and therefore can be said to constitute essential features of contemporary migranthood. Typologies of migrants which explicitly or implicitly plot respondents on transnationalism–integration–mobility matrices are therefore helpful for generalising about populations of migrants. However, the contribution of this article is to suggest a more finely tuned approach which can help to make sense of the different experiences and worldviews of interviewees in small-scale qualitative research. Firstly, one has to take into account the migrants’ capacities as well as their achievements to date. Secondly, it is crucial to acknowledge that migrants have many other identities in addition to their migrant ones. Only by considering these intersecting identities can one understand how each migrant arrived at particular mobility decisions, possesses certain transnational capabilities, is integrated to different extents in different domains and so forth.³ Of course, countries of origin and identification with particular regions of the world as well as the surrounding often fast changing historical circumstances are important parts of this identity mix.

The article also considered some examples of Ukrainian and Polish migrants’ own views about commonalities between migrants of different nationalities. Their observations could be grouped under the headings of mobility, transnationalism and integration: the idea of a world in motion where it was normal to be a migrant;

the difficulties of maintaining transnational relationships and managing homesickness; and certain aspects of (non)integration. Depending on each migrant's personal experiences and various social positionings and identities, they felt differently about what constituted typical integration experiences: whether migrants had to work non-stop or were able to spend time getting to know the new country and its people, and whether they were accepted by local residents. Occasionally, interviewees would link integration to transnational practices or mobility. A number of Ukrainians stressed how much they wanted to improve their Polish language, because language was fundamental if you wanted to settle in a country. Conversely, several asserted that their Polish acquaintances had ceased to be mobile and returned permanently to Poland because of the supreme importance they ascribed to family ties.

Regarding the wider question of how Poles' own migration experience affects the experiences of migrants coming from other countries to Poland: many of the interviewees' observations were quite detached and neutral in tone, so it would not be appropriate to assume the existence of empathy. Comments on the economic drivers of migration as a fact of life were based on a pragmatic, non-judgmental attitude towards labour migration. However, Poles can understand the transnational experiences of Ukrainian migrants: they know what it means to live straddling two countries. In this regard, some Poles (depending on their particular identities and past experiences) do demonstrate empathy. In particular, empathy can characterise people whose lives are affected by the migration of close family members. On the other hand, it seems that some Polish returnees, for whom their own migration was an episode now firmly in the past, overgeneralised on the basis of their previously intensely transnational lives, combined with limited integration abroad. They did so in ways which could assume too much similarity between themselves and their Ukrainian acquaintances: for example, tactlessly expressing the conviction that 'there's no place like home' or assuming that Ukrainians did not speak Polish. Some Polish return migrants in my sample demonstrated empathy when they reported feeling themselves to be the object of 'othering' abroad; sometimes they seemed able to imagine that Ukrainians might feel similarly in Poland. Even if many Polish interviewees had not personally experienced discrimination, a feeling of being conspicuous and an alertness to the possibility of encountering micro-aggression were viewed as common migrant experiences.


Notes

1. My non-Polish or Ukrainian interviewees were Armenian, Australian, Bangladeshi, Belarusian, Italian, Kazakh, Nigerian, Russian, Taiwanese, Turkish and Uruguayan.
2. Recently refined and extended by Ndofo-Tah *et al.* (2019).
3. For the sake of simplicity, this article has not considered Bourdieu's (1986) distinction between different types of capital. This is another way of looking at intersectionality adopted by a number of migration scholars.

Conflict of interest statement

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Agency and Social Relations in the Search for a Better Life: Female Migrant Entrepreneurs in Poland

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Dynamic changes and the increasing diversity of migrant societies support small-scale enclave businesses in Poland. Female migrants from Belarus and Ukraine appear to have found their niche in the beauty and cosmetology sector. Nevertheless, their entrepreneurship goes beyond the enclave market. Specialists provide services to migrant communities and simultaneously target Polish clients to ensure the success of their ventures. This article presents the results of qualitative research based on 13 in-depth interviews with Ukrainian and Belarusian beauty specialists. I focus on these businesswomen's narratives about their entrepreneurial trajectories. My aim is to explore how they use and extend their social relationships in order to acquire entrepreneurial agency. Entrepreneurship can be understood as a socially embedded practice. I apply an intersectionality approach to investigate the complexity of socially constructed identities and the dimensions of individual entrepreneurial agency. Incorporating a mixed embeddedness approach, I examine the impact of structural factors on entrepreneurial activity and the importance of social networks for women's self-realisation as independent beauty specialists.

Keywords: gender, female migrants, migrant entrepreneurship, social networks, beauty sector, agency

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Introduction

The entrepreneurship of female migrants can be a pathway to economic independence, an improvement in their social position and their active participation in the labour market. This article examines female migrant beauty specialists' entrepreneurial activities as an approach to a better life in a new country. The analysis focuses on Ukrainian and Belarusian female migrants and their small-scale enterprises in the beauty sector in Warsaw. I present examples of their business trajectories and how these female migrants used their social networks to acquire individual entrepreneurial agency. Although not a comparative study of the two nationalities, the research captures similarities in their communication processes with clients and the establishment of female-oriented spaces of social integration. I choose the beauty sector as strongly relational, embodied in an intimate social context – hence I consider both beauty treatments and social interactions (Idola 2021; Kryczka 2021). Such an approach allowed me to provide a more-nuanced analysis of the entrepreneurial strategy as a socially embedded practice (Idola 2021; James, Xiong and Anderson 2022; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Romero and Valdez 2016).

Located within the complexity of social, institutional and economic contexts (Kloosterman and Rath 2001), migrant women manifest their agency and challenge the inequalities (Dy 2020; James *et al.* 2022) of power structures and normative discourses of entrepreneurship (Ainsworth and Hardy 2007; Lassalle and Shaw 2021). They elaborate innovative entrepreneurial solutions (Kloosterman and Rath 2001), establish gendered social networks and create a socio-spatial environment for mutual interaction and support. From the micro perspective, they acquire empowerment (Kabeer 2002) and achieve their individual goals in a new country. The analysis privileges a sociological perspective on the agency of migrant women (Andrejuk 2015, 2018; Emmerik and Euwema 2018; Fedyuk 2016; Kindler 2012; Krajewska 2012; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Mahler 2006; Rydzik and Sundari 2020). To capture the intersectional perspective (Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Romero and Valdez 2016), the article focuses on the interplay of multiple dimensions: individual socially constructed features (gender, age, ethno-nationality, migration status, social class), social relations, social resources and how they shape the entrepreneurial path. The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictions on beauty services in Poland enabled me to include a unique examination of the multifaceted crisis and the remedial actions which female migrants took to secure their businesses. I inquire into the interrelation between the above dimensions through a gender-related perspective. The research contributes to the structuralist angle of understanding female entrepreneurship by applying the perspective of 'purposive action' (Kabeer 2002) and the exploration of how female migrants use and rationalise resources embedded in migrant and mainstream networks in their aim to elaborate successful entrepreneurial strategies (Hunt 2008; Lidola 2014; Rydzik and Sundari 2020). My main research question was: How do female migrant entrepreneurs experience running a business in a new country in times of crisis and pre-crisis? This was followed by two further questions concerning the entrepreneurial process of female migrants and the economic, social and symbolic dimensions of the business: What factors enhance and restrict female migrant entrepreneurial strategies? What is the role of social networks in developing a business and female migrants' entrepreneurship?

This article focuses on the entrepreneurial strategies and business activities of beauty specialists from Belarus and Ukraine as one of the numerically largest and significantly feminised migrant communities in Poland. Inter- and intra-community relationships between the Belarusian and the Ukrainian diasporas, the complexity of migrant networks and their resource infrastructure all frame female migrant entrepreneurship and impact on their business trajectories. In this article I refer to the bonding mechanism of social interactions embodied in the context of the intersectional gendered experiences which interviewees shared with both migrant and non-migrant clients. I first present an overview of migration processes to Poland and refer to some recent statistical data concerning Ukrainian and Belarusian migrant communities in Poland. In the next section,

I refer to theoretical concepts of agency (Andrejuk 2016; Bakewell 2010; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Kabeer 2002), social networks (Brown 2007; Granovetter 1973; Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1998) and the embeddedness of migrant entrepreneurship (Kloosterman 2010; Kloosterman and Rath 2001; Portes and Yiu 2013) that grounded my research. I also refer to the concepts of integrating space and meaningful interactions (Mayblin, Valentine and Winiarska 2016). After this, I present the results of my empirical research. Here, the interrelation of expectations and experiences in Poland, the business development path and solutions implemented by interviewees constitute the core elements of the analysis. The final section presents a concluding discussion on the role of social networks in the female migrant business process and the strategies which interviewees developed to ensure the success of their ventures and acquire empowerment.

Migration trends and the economic participation of migrants in Poland

Economic and political transformations in Poland, due firstly to the fall of communism and labour-market liberalisation and, later, to the country's accession to the European Union have shaped migration processes into and out of the country. Data from the Office for Foreigners show that, during the last 10 years, Poland has faced constantly increasing rates of immigration; official statistics record that, in 2020, more than 550,000 non-EU citizens had a form of residence permit (temporary residence, permanent residence or an EU long-term residence permit).¹ Besides the quantitative growth of migrant groups, Poland is also undergoing a social transformation as migrant communities become more diverse in terms of nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, education or employment and become active actors in mainstream society. For several years, statistical data on migration have shown that migrants consider Poland as a country of long-term residence related to settlement and community-building processes (Okólski and Wach 2020). Numerically, the major groups of new residents in 2021, according to the administration's statistics, were Ukrainians (366,643) and Belarusians (47,988).² Among EU states, Poland has been a primary destination country for Ukrainians since 2010, with a stable increase in arrivals since 2014 (Dolińska 2017). However, migration from Belarus to Poland remained low for years (Lesińska and Brunarska 2014). Since 2015, these figures have risen, particularly following the 2020 presidential election and in terms of the enclave market and network infrastructure (Petrakova 2022).

The other feature of migration trends to Poland is their progressive feminisation. Women constitute almost half of the migrant population from Ukraine and Belarus: 170,359 Ukrainians and 21,214 Belarusians in 2021. Female migrants participate actively in various labour-market sectors and local social and cultural activities. The gender-oriented perspective is widely described in migration studies by scholars in Poland (Dolińska 2017, 2019; Grabowska-Lusinska and Jazwinska 2009; Praszalowicz 2008; Slany 2009).

The data on applications for health and pension insurance (Social Insurance Institution or ZUS) can be used as a general indicator of the economic activity of migrants in Poland. According to ZUS, there were 725,173 non-Polish citizens registered for health and pension insurance in 2020.³ The largest groups were Ukrainians and Belarusians, with 532,503 and 50,606 migrants respectively. Female migrants made up almost a third (248,155) of all migrants registered for health and pension insurance.

The wide range of literature on the economic participation of female migrants in Poland shows that women follow diverse paths of labour activity, from highly qualified positions and forms of entrepreneurship to unregistered work in the 'shadow economy' (Andrejuk 2015; Dolińska 2019; Feduk 2016; Kindler 2012; Krajewska 2012). However, the entrepreneurial practices of female migrants in Poland have been less explored. A significant study of female Ukrainian migrants' experiences as business actors in Poland was provided by Katarzyna Andrejuk, who introduced a typology of female migrant self-employment strategies, defining them as the 'self-realisation strategy', 'survivor strategy' and 'family defender strategy' (Andrejuk 2018). These strategies reflect the remedial practices which female migrants employ to oppose socially

constructed structural impediments in the labour market. Entrepreneurship and self-employment have become widespread solutions among migrants, enabling them to avoid discriminatory practices in the labour market and to rationalise their resources of economic, human and social capital (Andrejuk 2016; Dheer 2018; Fairlie and Meyer 1996; Portes and Yiu 2013).

Migrants' rights to entrepreneurship in Poland are somewhat limited and depend on their legal status. The main normative act that defines the legal conditions of migrant entrepreneurship is the Act of 6 March 2018 on the Terms on which Foreign Entrepreneurs and Other Foreign Persons May Participate in Economic Trade in the Territory of the Republic of Poland. According to this document (Art. 4 point 1), only persons with a residence permit (either temporary or permanent), refugee status, subsidiary protection, temporary protection or a tolerated stay, together with Pole's Card-holders⁴ have the right to register their business venture on the Central Register and Information on Economic Activity (CEIDG) and to exercise business activity according to the general conditions as Polish citizens. The other form, more accessible in formal requirements, is the establishment of a partnership (whether registered, professional, limited or limited joint-stock).⁵ In this case, the primary condition is based on the performance of capital resources, not on the residence status. The Limited Partnership was the legal form preferred among the interviewees of my research. According to the Central Register and Information on Economic Activity (CEIDG), in 2019 there were around 21,000 migrant sole proprietorships registered in Poland.⁶ The main migrant groups who decide on such a form of self-employment are citizens of Ukraine and Belarus.

My research was focused on the beauty sector in Poland and the entrepreneurial activity of female migrants as owners of small-scale ventures. For the last few years, the beauty sector in Poland has constantly been on the increase due to the relatively low costs of entrance to the market and high demand for services (Kryczka 2021). Sole or small-scale (up to five employees) enterprises prevail in the sector, reflecting the main research question – the role of social networks maintained between the entrepreneurs and the client. According to data of 5 May 2022, there were around 95,000 beauty and hair salons in Poland.⁷ Official data did not allow me to estimate the number of enterprises established by migrants.

Another aim of the study was to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on female migrant entrepreneurial strategies, as this health crisis represented a significant challenge for the beauty sector in Poland, affecting the general conditions and business prospects of small-scale and individual entrepreneurs.⁸ Administrative restrictions meant that all beauty, nail and hair salons were temporarily closed between 1 April and 18 May 2020. Thus, the empirical element of my study was conducted after the re-opening of such salons, which allowed me to include the perspective of interviewees' entrepreneurial agency in a context of multifaceted crisis and its structural conditions.

Theoretical background

Agency and entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship can be conceptualised as a manifestation of migrant agency. As one of the main problems which female migrants face in a labour market is discrimination (unequal or precarious conditions of employment) and deskilling (the inability to work according to their education and skills), self-employment improves their likelihood of achieving independence and professional development (Andrejuk 2018; Baycan and Nijkamp 2006; Verduijn *et al.* 2014). Their own business venture allows women to become visible as entrepreneurs and active actors in the labour market and social environment and to achieve individual goals. Although various studies have been done on female migrant entrepreneurship (Andrejuk 2015; Colombelli,

Grinza, Meliciani and Rossi 2020; Dolińska 2019; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Lidola 2014; Ratan 2018; Webster and Haandrikman 2017), still not much is known about female migrants' perspective on solo ventures and the development strategies between enclaves and the mainstream markets. This article provides insights into the social embeddedness of migrant entrepreneurs (Imaobong *et al.* 2021; Kloosterman, Van der Leun and Rath 1999), focusing on individual entrepreneurial strategies and exploring how women utilise social resources to improve their business and personal success.

The concept of agency is widely discussed in sociology and social science (Archer 2010; Bakewell 2010; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Giddens 1984). Various theoretical studies refer to the complexity and interplay between agency and structure (Archer 2010; Bakewell 2010). The notion of the agency–structure nexus finds its explanation in the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1984). The approach provides two theoretical assumptions used in the current article: firstly, the core features of agency should be defined through the actor's reflexivity and ability to perform and modify action (Bakewell 2010; Giddens 1984; Kabeer 2002). Secondly, agency is manifested in the actor's relation to structural patterns. The structure appears in the academic literature as either an opportunity or an oppression (Kloosterman 2010; Kloosterman *et al.* 1999; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Rydzik and Sundari 2020). In other words, structure determines opportuneness for or constraints on the agent's actions (Hays 1992). In migration studies, the 'agency–structure' approach has been used to define a migrant as an active actor embedded in a complex, heterogeneous context of social relations – also implicated by institutional, socio-cultural and economic patterns in the new place of residence (Andrejuk 2016, 2018; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Lassalle and Shaw 2021). Structuration also provides a framework that can be applied to examine sectors which contain female migrant entrepreneurial activity. Scholars provide an ongoing debate on the emancipatory and oppressive potential of entrepreneurship, defining the category of female migrants as a 'disadvantaged' entity (James *et al.* 2022; Verduijn *et al.* 2014). Migrant women experience multi-dimensional structural disadvantages, which reflect inequalities (Romero and Valdez 2016) and the gendered distribution of roles (Andrejuk 2018; Lassalle and Shaw 2021) within the enclave and mainstream social environments.

In my research, I also consider the complexity of inter-community relations between Ukrainian and Belarusian enclaves and mainstream society. In developing beauty salons, female entrepreneurs navigate in between these structures in their everyday business activities. For the current analysis, an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Romero and Valdez 2016) was also applied to better understand how female migrants mobilise social resources and use them to foster the development of their initiatives. Implementing a gender approach, the analysis of business trajectories allows the conceptualisation of entrepreneurial agency as migrant beauty specialists' response to socially embedded power structures (Rydzik and Sundari 2020) in the enclave and mainstream markets through the diversification of targeted clienteles and the de-ethnicisation of beauty services.

Another dimension of the theoretical concept of agency focuses on its relational character. Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962) define agency as a 'temporally embedded process of social engagement', such that 'agency shapes social action' (*ibidem*: 963). This theoretical approach constitutes the core element of the conceptualisation of female migrant entrepreneurship in the current article. The parameters of success or failure of the interviewees' business activities depended on their social relations and networking processes. Beauty specialists intentionally create female-oriented networks within their entrepreneurial frameworks to safeguard their business, optimise the necessary resources and to feel like 'recognised' specialists and members of a new society. The interrelations between social structural conditions, the individual positioning of female migrants as entrepreneurs and the gendered social interactions developed within the business activity can be conceptualised according to Nalia Kabeer's theoretical concept of 'purposive action'. Kabeer determines agency as a dimension of empowerment and defines it through the context of a purposive action or an individual ability to 'specify goals and act upon

them' (Kabeer 2002: 443). In my research, I apply Kabeer's concept to the female entrepreneurship context and refer to the positive meaning of agency, understood as a 'capacity to define one's life choices and to pursue one's own goals, even in the face of opposition from others' (Kabeer 2002: 438). Such an approach allows us to find out when and in which circumstances female migrants exercise autonomy and follow individual choices to improve their ventures. The notion of purposive action also defines female migrants' approach to entrepreneurship through a willingness to take risks and apply innovative solutions (Andrejuk 2016; Portes and Yiu 2013) in order to enter and extend beauty services in mainstream market structures while simultaneously functioning in the enclave environment.

Agency, embeddedness, and social networks

Migrant entrepreneurs develop their ventures in a new country of residence through rationalising human, social and economic resources. External conditions define both possible opportunities and impediments impacting on decision-making processes and entrepreneurial strategies. The mixed embeddedness theoretical approach provides an ontological framework in which to conceptualise the phenomenon of structural opportunities and constraints within migrants' business activity (Kloosterman *et al.* 1999). This approach highlights the multidimensional embeddedness of migrants in the social networks of co-ethnic communities and in the wider socioeconomic and political-institutional environment (Colombelli *et al.* 2020). Adapting this theoretical approach to the perspective of female migrants' entrepreneurial strategies leads to the analysis of multilayered relations within enclave (Ukrainian, Belarusian, etc.), inter-enclave and mainstream structures. Empirical research provides evidence of the complex social interrelations which female entrepreneurs develop within both migrant and mainstream markets. The growth of migrant communities in Poland and the extension of virtual reality through online social communities improves social-capital cumulation and its accessibility to its members (Homel 2020). For their adaptation and settlement in a new environment, migrants rationalise and operationalise the available resources by taking advantage of the enclave networks, which become an important source of social support enabling its members to start their new ventures and define market niches within mainstream society (Homel 2020). The complexity of intercommunity infrastructure, resources and network accessibility for Ukrainian and Belarusian entrepreneurs affects their strategies in Poland. On the one hand, migrants develop their ventures depending on the demands of enclaves and migrant markets. On the other, entrepreneurs find themselves in direct and indirect competition in terms of power relations (strategic resources), new identity formation and positioning in the mainstream market. The interrelationship of individual agency and social networks completes our understanding of how migrant network resources are used to improve the entrepreneurial process. This article presents examples of how interviewees operationalise and diversify social resources in order to gain autonomy and create a new social and economic venture situated 'in-between' enclave and mainstream market structures.

The recent literature highlights that migrant women face the complex effects of gender, ethnicity and social status that impact on their experience of migration, integration and patterns of self-agency in a new host country (Baycan and Nijkamp 2006; Colombelli *et al.* 2020; James *et al.* 2022; Romero and Valdez 2016). Intersecting dimensions of age, country of origin, migration status, education, employment and marital status directly impact on networking mechanisms and the role of female migrants as entrepreneurs. Mahler found that gender affects the behavioural attitudes of migrant entrepreneurs more than does ethnicity (Mahler 2001). Structural regimes significantly constrain the opportunities for entrepreneurial activity for female migrants. This also explains why female migrant entrepreneurs are more likely to use informal networks than men (Emmerik and Euwema 2018) and tend to establish networks that provide financial and social support to their members. Studies on female entrepreneurship show a significant advantage of value-added and symbolic

dimensions (such as emotional support, encouragement and solidarity) among female entrepreneurs over males (Idola 2013; Leskinen 2017). As presented in the article, empirical research confirms theoretical assumptions and provides evidence that female migrants rationalise social relations and deepen female-oriented networks on the path to sole entrepreneurship. Within business strategies, women create social bonding mechanisms embedded in the shared aesthetical norms and commonalities of the gendered experience of a daily routine rather than in ethnic identity. Social networks established due to their business activity empowers migrant entrepreneurs due to the restoration of their social status and access to meaningful integration with other women.

Research method

The study is qualitative and based on 13 in-depth interviews with female migrant specialists in the beauty sector who developed their careers in Warsaw (10 Ukrainian and 3 Belarusian). I am aware that this limited number of cases does not allow in-depth comparative analysis of their business trajectories, the complexities of inter-group relations or networking mechanisms. Hence this paper is just a first step in a more profound study on the topic. The research was conducted during the period July–September 2020. All participants were informed about the methodology and goals of the research, their right to refuse answering the question or to withdraw the interview. To ensure anonymity all names used in the article have been changed. Interviewees were asked to describe their expectations of life in Poland, their history of migration and their post-migration experience, focusing on developing their career path, goals and the role of social ties which they use or create to approach their vision of a better life. Interviewees were reached through personal contacts and recommendations from other beauty specialists. Interviews were conducted in either Polish or Russian then transcribed into Polish and I met with each woman in person, either in their salons, their apartments or in cafés. The material was coded and analysed with MAXQDA. At the time of the research, my interviewees had been living in Poland for between 2 and 11 years. They represented different age groups (from 20 to 40 years old), marital status and education levels and two had children. This differentiation allowed me to better understand the individual motivations and structural impediments to female migrants' entrepreneurship.

Of the specialists, 10 owned beauty salons in Warsaw, in which 5 worked individually, 3 had already extended their business and hired a beauty specialist and 2 maintained their business themselves – a mother and daughter who had a massage studio and an esthetician who rented a studio with her friend but offered different beauty treatments. This diversity of business models enabled me to gain more information about factors affecting entrepreneurship and the remedial actions which women took to develop their careers. One interviewee postponed her salon's opening due to Covid-19 while two specialists offered beauty treatments in their private apartments but were considering moving to a salon in the future. All had been specialists in the beauty industry for between 2 and 10 years, including their pre-migration period and any employment in Poland before becoming entrepreneurs. A Ukrainian cosmetologist and a Belarusian manicurist relocated their business to Poland when they migrated. Three cosmetologists graduated from Polish universities and their business was a natural continuation of their education. For all the other participants, their decision to move to Poland was related to the previous migration of their partner or family member but was not necessarily their own choice or idea.

Findings

My interviewees willingly shared their individual stories of the difficulties and successes on their entrepreneurial paths. Deskilling, loneliness, discrimination and dissatisfaction with their social position were the main initial disadvantages which motivated interviewees to undertake the challenge of entrepreneurship. After deciding to settle in Poland, their labour-market activity was restricted due to difficulties in legalising their settlement procedures and the lack of social networks. To better understand the performance of entrepreneurial activities, I examine the intersection between social attributions, age, education, reasons for migrating, length of stay in Poland, previous experience in the beauty sector, previous employment and the structural characteristics of the enclave and mainstream networks. The main characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1. Referring to the multi-layered oppression structure and the intersection of gendered race and class hierarchies within enclave and mainstream networks, my research acknowledges the diversity of migrant women's experiences and the complexity of their entrepreneurial agency.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

	Age	Country of origin	Marital status	Reason for migration	Time in Poland	Time in beauty sector	Own salon	Time owning salon
P1	30s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Work	4 years	8 years	Yes	2 years
P2	20s	Ukraine	With partner, not married	Followed partner	2 years	23 months	Yes	6 months
P3	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education	4 years	4 years	Yes	1 year
P4	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education	8 years	7 years	Yes	1 year
P5	20s	Belarus	Married to co-national	Education	6 years	4 years	Yes	1 year
P6	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education	6 years	4 years	Yes	1 year 3 months
P7	20s	Belarus	Married to Ukrainian	Work	4 years	4 years	Yes	2 years
P8	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education/work	8 years	6 years	Yes	3 years
P9	20s	Ukraine	Single	Education	10 years	2 years	Yes	2 years
P10	40s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Work	11 years	3 years	Yes	3 years
P11	30s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Followed husband	3 years	2 years 5 months	No	—
P12	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education	7 years	6 years	No	—
P13	40s	Belarus	Married to co-national	Work	3 years	10 years	No	—

The decision to develop their venture was conditioned by multiple axes of individual, social and institutional factors. The beauty sector was perceived as an attractive niche for individual entrepreneurial activity as it did not require significant investment and could be developed solely by specialists. The demand in mainstream markets and the increasing potential of enclave markets due to ongoing migration processes

were also perceived to be an opportunity to minimise business risks. The interviewees' human capital (previous specialist education, personal experience in beauty services) fostered the decision-making process as it was perceived as a logical continuation of their career.

Interviewees mentioned that, when rationalising their business perspectives, their partners' and friends' support was perceived as the main determinant of success. The majority of the interviewees were married or had partners in Poland. All were in a relationship with a migrant, mostly a compatriot. Beauty specialists admitted that their partners – some of whom were also entrepreneurs – provided them with informational, instrumental and emotional support or were even formally registered as their business partner within their enterprise.

Following previous migration trends, enclave social networks seemed to be a significant strategic resource for beauty specialists, a place where they could gain information and material and social support. Interviewees mentioned that their business advisors, accountants or first clients were primarily compatriots. However, they did not focus on enclave communities as their target market but highlighted the embeddedness of their ventures in broader migrant networks. In their social interactions with clients, overlapping aspects such as the acknowledgement of clients' demands in terms of aesthetical trends, beauty norms and the accessibility of treatments for migrant women in the mainstream market framed their entrepreneurial trajectories. To describe the social complexity of their business, interviewees used terms such as 'our people', 'our girls' and 'Russian-speaking', which allowed them to diversify access to resources and widen their perspectives for business development beyond narrowly defined ethnic enclaves. Conflictual aspects such as power relations over strategic resources and direct/indirect competition also appeared in interviewees' narratives.

This article analyses the business trajectories which these specialists followed, from performing services in private apartments to investing in regular salons. Although the 'informal' period was perceived as risky, as unregulated work might negatively affect their chances of legalisation in Poland, it allowed my interlocutors to generate resources such as sufficient knowledge of the market, clients and finances with a view to further development of their businesses – considered essential for their socialisation and adaptation in a new country.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the temporary closure of the sector affected business prospects and challenged development strategies. A sense of financial instability, the uncertainty about future epidemiological situations and their responsibility to their clients, employees and family members made participants overthink and rationalise their business strategies. It was also a challenge for beauticians as they had to resurrect their business after lockdown and many of their clients had returned to the country of origin or had a reduced income. To counter this, my interviewees extended their online activities, focusing on developing more trusting and personalised relationships with their clients. One such a solution was to combine their business profile on social media with personal blogs. Some women also decided to focus on the mainstream market by extending their advertising in the Polish language. Flexibility and an openness to new challenges were mentioned as important features which the beauticians gained during the health crisis. Intersecting rationalisation (Idola 2021) and the mixed embeddedness of business-venture interviewees simultaneously determined the desirability or undesirability of their structural position in a labour market (Khan 2021). All interviewees referred to their social positioning as limited by the oppressive stereotyping of female migrants' precarious labour-market activity. Destabilising such discriminatory approaches (Idola 2021), they defined their goals as entrepreneurial independence (as 'businesswomen') and gendered empowerment (as 'recognised specialists' and 'successful female migrants').

Expectations, experience, motivations

Different reasons motivated my interviewees to start their own businesses. Nevertheless, they all highlighted the desire to become independent in their decision-making and entrepreneurial choices, to realise their interests and hobbies and to be recognised as respectable specialists. All my Ukrainian interlocutors mentioned that they had experienced everyday racism and stereotyping after migrating to Poland; my Belarusian specialists did not mention this but did highlight the intersectional inequalities they faced post-migration. Disadvantages during the previous months or years, such as low-skilled jobs and precarious work conditions, periods with no professional occupation, discrimination, sexual harassment, a sense of loneliness and the deterioration of their mental state, pushed women to consider sole entrepreneurship as an opportunity for better perspectives. Other research has shown that the difficulties which participants encountered were merely gender-related and resulted from power structures in migrant and mainstream societies (Rydzik and Anitha 2019). Natalia, who experienced sexual harassment at her workplace as a young woman from Ukraine, summed up her story: 'I faced many things here, racism, discrimination... really when I came here, I understood what racism is'. The decision to leave stressful and disadvantaged positions and take a risk in setting up their own enterprise gives evidence of female migrants' agency and subjectivity (Idola 2021). Rationalising her options – such as returning to Ukraine or finding other employment – the niche of beauty services for Natalia became an escape route to safer and more desirable activity: 'And it was tough for me, I was already thinking of leaving... I understood that I shouldn't quit this job. Still, at least I could offer depilation services'. Following this idea, she started treating migrant clients at home before moving to a rented salon in the city centre after a few months.

Two other interviewees had experienced the setting up of beauty enterprises in Belarus and Ukraine. They decided to shut down their businesses in their countries of origin and reopen salons in Poland, taking the risk which the opportunity afforded them. For them, self-promotion within co-ethnic online groups became an immediate solution to gain clients and ensure work from the first days of immigration. Others started their career in Poland from scratch. Two interviewees began their first work in nail salons in shopping malls, while another three found employment in beauty salons owned by other migrants (mainly Ukrainians). Low pay, unfavourable work conditions, the unsatisfactory quality of services performed there and the inability to build social relationships with clients motivated these specialists to leave this employment and follow their own path.

What overruled interviewees' doubts were the structural opportunities in the Polish labour market and the potential profits seen in the high demand for beauty treatments, the low costs of the entrance (financial and legal) requirements and the accessibility of strategic resources through their enclave and inter-community networks. They perceived the emerging beauty market in Poland as an attractive niche for small-scale entrepreneurial activity. As an opportunity factor, participants also perceived the stable growth and feminisation of migrant communities. To improve their resilience, they diversified their social resources; to prevent their dependence on the enclave market they, at least declaratively, planned to expand their offer on the mainstream market. Servicing Polish clients was mentioned as the primary goal or desirable direction in which to take their business.

Entrepreneurship and the role of social networks

Research has shown that female migrants' entrepreneurial strategies were quite informal (Emmerik, Euwema, Geschiere and Schouten 2006) and embedded in extended social-networking processes. Julia summed up her success story with this statement: 'It is essential to have people who will help you'. So what is the role of the

enclave market and migrant communities for migrant start-ups in Poland? Scholars have broadly described the role of the former as an opportunity factor (Kloosterman and Rath 2001). One of the approaches refers to self-sufficiency, as migrant entrepreneurs respond to the demands of co-national communities (Portes and Manning 2006). The change in the immigration trend to Poland from circular migration to more settled and more profound diversification among migrant communities also revealed a wide range of new lifestyle services such as beauty salons, shops and gyms, etc. What was very evident from interviewees' narratives was that the Ukrainian community, as the numerically largest migrant group in Poland, became a significant source through which to develop and secure their beauty salons. The accessibility of resources and the broad social networks also enabled them to minimise the costs and business risks during the Covid-19 lockdown. Migrant entrepreneurs provide members of their communities with a wide range of services and goods which they could not afford on the mainstream market. They thus filled a new market niche through the delivery of new services and their co-nationals and other migrants became the first step for beauty specialists. The lack of a language barrier and the commonalities of aesthetic and beauty values (Idola 2021) facilitated their entrance into the market. Participants admitted that they counted on the growing number of female migrants from Ukraine and Belarus to be a guaranteed clientele safeguarding the continuity of their initiative and ensuring financial benefits. As Anna estimated: 'Probably 90 per cent of them [clients] are our girls – Ukrainian, Belarusian... Most of them are, perhaps, from Ukraine and Lithuania, while some are from Romania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan...'

Where embeddedness in social networks helped beauticians to develop their salons, a lack of such networks increased the risk of failure on the regular market. Kateryna highlighted the importance of creating a stable client base before opening a salon – she had to start up her business twice, following its failure at the first attempt. She rented a salon, invested in its renovation and purchased equipment but had no clients. Although she was a qualified specialist who had graduated from a Polish university, she lacked clients who could promote her work and recommend her services. To rectify this situation, Kateryna closed the salon and began to work privately from her home, promoting her beauty treatments on social media amongst the migrant community. When, a couple of months later she reopened the salon, it began to prosper.

Besides business reasons, Ukrainian and Belarusian clients also used social networks to replace missed social relationships. Interviewees highlighted that it was a chance for them to get to know other female migrants and overcome the extreme sense of loneliness in Poland. Elena described her first months in Poland, before she started offering manicures, thus: 'I think it was a crucial moment, I missed contacts terribly. I couldn't even talk to anyone, go out for coffee, or a glass of wine... It motivated me to write an advert and offer manicures...'

Female entrepreneurs also developed their social circle to ensure mutual emotional support and self-affirmation. Offering cosmetic and beauty treatments, they created spaces where they interacted daily with other migrant women. Some became close friends with their clients; they spent their free time together and shared the care of their children. As Anna said of her relations with clients:

Most of my clients became my very close friends. I even became a godmother to her child for one of them, so now we are family... I appreciate them [clients] because each girl has her interesting story. And I understand that... they come to me with their problems, we share it, talk about it.

Understanding cultural and beauty norms allowed them to regain the social recognition and authority lost due to migration. Finally, by embedding the venture in social networks and working primarily with women, female migrant entrepreneurs considered their work to be physically safer.

The female-oriented social environment allowed them to minimise negative experiences of sexism, discrimination and xenophobia. As mentioned earlier, my interlocutors highlighted the importance of also

serving clients on the mainstream market. Nevertheless, the extension of intra-communal social ties revealed further structural impediments – the acknowledgment/undermining of education and professionalism, the language barrier, the lack of social contacts and the perceived ‘otherness’ (Khan 2021). Expanding their services to a broader target group required interviewees’ readiness to develop direct contact with Poles. The fear of misunderstanding, the differences in standards of beauty and treatments and the continuous stereotyping demotivated my interlocutors from developing the social environment of their ventures more broadly.

The role of informal social networks for migrant entrepreneurship also came to light in the context of the Covid-19 health crisis and the temporary closure of beauty salons – causing interviewees to lose their regular income and forcing them to focus on online communication to maintain client contact. Elena and Svetlana combined their business profiles with personal blogs in which they shared advice about skin care at home, promoted beauty products and spoke of their daily routine during lockdown. Elena translated her blog into Polish in order to reach new clients and promote the business:

To be honest, it was during quarantine when I started to develop [my business]. More advertisements, Instagram, additional discounts and gifts for clients. I wanted to expand because I thought ‘I’m in Poland. Our girls who live here, from Ukraine or Belarus, they also speak Polish so they can read it’. And I decided to change it. From that day, everything I published was in Polish.

None of participants who ran salons before the health crisis had to resign from their activity, despite the hardships posed by lockdown and restrictions. An openness to risk, the flexibility of their business strategies and their embeddedness in informal networks all strengthened their individual agency over multifaceted structural impediments.

The development path

All interviewees underwent different personal experiences while developing their careers; however, similar patterns appeared on their development paths. Their business trajectories reflected the tendency to diversify their social resources and navigate between the enclave and the mainstream markets. Here, I broaden the discussion about the intersection of gendered entrepreneurial agency and the mixed embeddedness of their ventures. The proposed concepts allow me to focus on the patterns of inequality during the start-up period that emerged as a result of my interlocutors’ interactions with institutional factors, social networks and individual features. Insufficient knowledge of the Polish language and the long-drawn-out legalisation and administration procedures were the main barriers to launching a business. Interviewees faced double disadvantages as women and migrants involved in the gendered sector of care and beauty treatments.

To turn structural impediments into opportunity resources, participants developed business strategies and rationalised their decisions (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen 2009) as I describe later. In the beauty and care sectors, social embeddedness and the informality of social contacts played a significant role in female migrant business activity. When developing their ventures, my research participants diversified and rationalised their social environments by merging emotional and professional ties with both migrant and mainstream clients. Each step required access to resources embedded in social networks, which highlights the relational character of the entrepreneurship process. The correlation of business steps with social resources is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Business steps and social resources

Business steps	Social resources
Step 1 – Informal work in private apartments/ employment	Access to migrant networks and strategic resources (information, finances, specialists)
Step 2 – Decision to develop their own business	Access to female migrant networks (clients, advisors, friends) to safeguard the client base
Step 3 – Opening their own salon	Access to the mainstream market (Polish clients, new communication strategies)
Step 4 – Further development and transition into the mainstream market	The establishment of an integrating ‘feminised social space’

Beauty salon in a private apartment

As mentioned earlier, interviewees gradually developed their careers, expanding their migrant niche to the mainstream market. The scholarly literature defines the role of the enclave market for migrant entrepreneurs as a niche for development and for accessing sufficient social, economic and material resources (Andersson 2021; Portes and Manning 2006). Among interviewees, the majority started off by working from their private apartments, strengthening trustworthy social contacts and attracting new clients. Olga described her networking mechanisms thus: ‘When the client came to me, and she liked it [manicure], she came back, recommended my contact to her friends, mother, aunt. Each girl brought two or three close friends to me’.

This period was also perceived as a time when interviewees focused on themselves, developing a business that satisfied their interests and was meaningful for them. They maximised the positive effects of enclave-oriented business activity and confronted the structural disadvantages that affected their entrance into the mainstream market. Specialists also became acquainted with market trends and institutional requirements, learned the Polish language and attended cosmetology training. This approach to self-development and professionalisation revealed their subjective formation as an entrepreneur and how they dealt with disadvantages.

Natalia and other participants also perceived their first period as an important time for adaptation and ‘finding their place’ in Poland: ‘Finally I have realised that I do what I want, I have my friends and close people around. The decision to move to Poland was a good decision’. Communication with other female migrants gave participants a sense of self-confidence and helped them to overcome the lack of female contacts. The other breakthrough element that reflected the passage between the enclave and the mainstream markets was the re-negotiation of ‘otherness’ (James *et al.* 2022), developing the social and spatial environments beyond the migrant community by reference to generalised beauty norms and body care practices. During the ‘apartment’ period, interviewees met their first Polish clients and extended their professional relations. Anna described this difference: ‘They [Polish clients] have an attitude towards you more like that to a specialist, that you are a specialist for them. And our [migrant] girls come to me as friends’. Such experience allowed women to overcome the uncertainties related to the language barrier and social or cultural differences and get used to working with Polish clients.

Referring to the relational feature of the beauty sector, it is possible to conclude that the initial period of responses to the women’s business career served as an essential step in the operationalisation of social relations and the strengthening of the individual’s position as a trustworthy specialist within the enclave and mainstream social contexts. Due to the varied channels, beauty specialists created and extended their female networks. However, the structurally disadvantaged feminised sector appeared to become an empowering niche for

entrepreneurship. Beauty specialists utilised their entrepreneurial agency to establish a meaningful social environment (Mayblin *et al.* 2016), confronting either normative (Lassalle and Shaw 2021) or ethnic (Khan 2021) discourses of entrepreneurship.

The decision to open the salon

‘I felt sure to move on’, commented Viktoria on her decision to start her beauty salon. The confidence of having a sufficient clientele and access to a social network supported the risk-taking decision to expand. The formalisation of business activity was linked to the need to fulfill institutional requirements and possess financial resources. Although the administrative procedures to register the venture were perceived as relatively uncomplicated, various barriers related to migration status and lack of social contacts limited the opportunities for developing their own business. Natalia also highlighted the difficulties of taking out a loan or leasing to purchase the necessary equipment. During the research period, three interviewees continued offering treatments in their private apartments. They perceived this as a temporary arrangement, as the main difficulties were related to external barriers such as the extended legalisation procedure and the lack of financial resources.

When dealing with administrative and economic requirements, participants simultaneously focused on maintaining a female network and developing a socio-spatial environment in which to attract new clients. My interlocutors concentrated on the quality of services and socio-spatial features such as communication and advertising strategies on social media, the visualisation of the interior and the development of diversified offers of cosmetic treatments. All participants perceived the opening of their salon as a significant step in their career. The main change was related to the decision to attract more Polish clients. Extended contact with the local clientele was perceived as a business success, the acceptance of professionalisation and proof and recognition of being equal actors in the market. To ensure the inclusivity of beauty salons, interviewees referred to generalised norms of beauty practices and rejected visible features of ‘otherness’ and ethnicity. The notion of ‘female space’ also appeared in their narratives. As Daria said: ‘I want my clients to feel comfortable. They come to me not only for beautiful nails but also to talk about their problems, partners, female staff’. Significant attention was also paid to discussing with clients their beauty and health treatments and the mundane context of female well-being and self-affirmation practices. Explaining the social aspects of her work, Anna mentioned the positive attitude of her clients: ‘...as I finish their nails and they say: “God, I feel like a queen!”’, it is so nice that they like it [the manicure], they feel better, more confident and I say that it is not just a matter of nails’. Conversations like this encouraged Anna to continue her work and strengthened her sense of self-esteem. From individual and meso analyses, the transition from the private (apartment) to the public (salon) space emancipated specialists as social actors and affected their social positioning, evolving from disadvantaged to successful entrepreneurs.

Business strategy: enclave, mainstream market or in-between?

While their definition of a successful business evolved around independent beauty salons or clinics, my interviewees highlighted the importance of serving both migrant and non-migrant clients. Such an approach allowed them to diversify their access to resources, extend their services and minimise business risks. Social support available in the migrant community was used to fill the gaps where social contacts were missing in mainstream society. Diversification of the client group was reflected in participants’ communication and management strategies. Most women said they used native languages in the workplace, although formal conversions on social media were provided only in Polish. Besides language, they also standardised the design of the salons – no ethnic or cultural attributes were used or manifested in shared spaces. Interesting examples

of how beauty specialists elaborated solutions to balance the conditions imposed by enclave and mainstream markets were their price strategies. Running a regular salon required higher expenses, which obliged entrepreneurs increase their prices. Nevertheless, my interviewees tried to keep costs lower than in the mainstream market to make them available and attractive for both migrant and Polish women. Some, like Viktoria, offered discounts and gifts for less-wealthy clients: ‘I raised the prices but, for our girls, it was costly. I know how much they earn. Some of them work for 10–12 zlotys [2–3 euros] per hour... I always try to get some discounts or presents for them’. Table 3 offers some solutions to the balance between the enclave and the mainstream market.

Table 3. Solutions to the balance between the enclave and the mainstream market

Enclave market	Mainstream market
Clients ‘trusted’ = migrant women	Clients ‘preferred’ = Polish women
Specialists (cosmetologists, hairdressers) rather than co-national	Specialists (accountants, social media, marketing manager) rather than Polish
Language of internal communication = Ukrainian, Russian	Language for communication with clients and social media = Polish
Prices ‘rather high’ for migrant clients – additional discounts and gifts attract migrant clients	Prices lower than in the mainstream market to attract Polish clients

Generally, in the beauty sector, female migrant entrepreneurs do not undergo a simple transition from the enclave to the mainstream market but develop new socially and economically embedded ventures ‘in-between’ both markets in order to make their business competitive and profitable. From an agency-oriented research perspective, such an approach explains how interviewees purposefully manage their communication and entrepreneurial strategies anchored in trust-building processes with both Polish and migrant clients. I find that beauty specialists create spaces for more-inclusive female interaction through their business activity, establishing places of encounter and social integration for women from different social environments. Such a shift did not appear in the case of entrepreneurship oriented solely towards the enclave market or fully towards the mainstream market. An intersectionality lens allowed me to take a more in-depth look at how interviewees embedded their ventures in the landscape of multicultural consumption (Idola 2021).

The beauty salon: a space of meaningful encounter

The last aspect that I refer to in this article is entrepreneurship as an ‘emancipatory activity’ (Rindova *et al.* 2009). Research findings support the idea that female entrepreneurship is more related to informal networking and emphasises the notion of ‘places of encounter’ (Mayblin *et al.* 2016). Although the initial purpose of the interviewees was to gain financial benefits and economic autonomy, the non-economic, symbolic meaning of gendered commonalities and trustful relations contributed to their sense of success and well-being. Female entrepreneurs elaborated and strengthened social relations beyond merely economic activity (Verduijn *et al.* 2014). From an individual perspective, contact with female clients mitigated structural difficulties and inequalities. Positive encounters enhanced their self-confidence as ‘approved’ entrepreneurs in a new country of residence and their determination to further develop their salon. Svetlana and Natalia planned to move to new and more spacious salons, while Elena planned to employ new specialists. Financial stability also affected other aspects of my interviewees’ lives. Anna said that she would be able to invest in education and enroll in workshops abroad. Olga made a decision to buy her apartment. The ability to support other migrant women appeared to be one of the essential values of business. As Julia commented: ‘I always tell my girls “You can

do more, just believe in yourself'. And I try to show through my example that I, an ordinary girl from Ukraine, I can do my job and motivate someone else'. Interviewees' beauty salons became places not only of 'good service' but of 'meaningful contact' (Mayblin *et al.* 2016: 3), where interactions are based on common recognition, respect and trust. The research shows that 'purposeful' communication and interaction strategies elaborated by female migrants reflected the emancipatory aspects of entrepreneurs and challenged structural modes of domination and inequality.

Conclusion

Changes in migration trends to Poland from circular to long-term or even permanent settlement reflect the diversification of economic activity and the increase of small-scale enterprises and services within the migrant community. Favourable labour-market conditions allowed the development and formalisation of migrant businesses. For female migrants, the increased demand for beauty and cosmetology services by migrants and local Polish clients alike created a niche for entrepreneurial activity. Belarusian and Ukrainian specialists contributed to the development of the sector by establishing a varied range of beauty salons. They became active actors in the enclave and mainstream markets, challenging the normative gendered discourse of successful entrepreneurship.

My research has shown that, during the development stage of their business activity, female migrants mobilised resources from the migrant network, created and diversified social ties within their social networks and rationalised business strategies to ensure services for both migrant and mainstream clients. Belarusian and Ukrainian entrepreneurs purposively modified their business strategies to turn 'disadvantages' (the prolongation of legalisation procedures, language barriers, financial costs, etc.) into assets (Imaobong *et al.* 2021). Understanding the interplay and interaction between migrant mainstream structures and the variations in participants' business strategies adds essential dimensions to the conceptualisation of migrant agency.

The exploration of female migrant entrepreneurship showed that their business strategies were based on informal networking and the shared non-economic values of beauty practices and gendered experience. The female-oriented approach defines a plan to develop, secure and extend the self-owned venture. A reliance on social ties with other female migrants became a core pattern of the initial stage of the development path – while working in their apartments, advertising on social media and then opening regular salons. The social embeddedness of the venture also enabled women to safeguard their businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic. When extending the venture into the mainstream market, the importance of support-oriented relations based on everyday migration experiences decreased, giving space for a more general social interaction. Social relationships developed by a specialist with their clients, either with a migration background or non-migrants, gave an insight into the balancing act between the ethnic and the mainstream market.

On the one hand, female migrants obtained benefits such as the restoration of their social status and relations lost due to migration to Poland, independence, self-confidence, financial security and general well-being, all of which impacted on their plans to extend their business. On the other hand, they created a social space for meaningful encounters and intra-community integration. Analysis of the overlapping and conflictual aspects of social relations between diasporas will also be important for future research.

The main aim of my research was to examine how migrant women acquire entrepreneurial agency through their business activity and the role of social relations along the entrepreneurial path. I am aware that the study was limited in scale and comes with limitations that should be considered in further research. Any future empirical study should be designed to provide a more nuanced look at the interrelation between enclave, inter-community and mainstream market structures from the perspective of female business actors. It should be undertaken on a larger scale, to include a comparison between particular migrant groups – female Belarusian

and Ukrainian entrepreneurs – and to examine their strategies, the social aspects of their business activities and the dynamics of their inter-community relationships. Finally, the recent impact of Russian aggression in Ukraine, which has increased migration and the further feminisation of migrant communities in Poland, may significantly affect female migrant entrepreneurship. Further research should also be undertaken to examine the impact of war on the intersecting identities of female migrants and to conceptualise agency through the lens of migrant businesswomen's responses to multifaceted crises.

Notes

1. Office for Foreigners: Actual documents: residence permit 2020, <https://migracje.gov.pl/statystyki/zakres/polska> (accessed 20 February 2022).
2. The data indicate holders of one of the residence permits in 2021, according to the Office for Foreigners, <https://migracje.gov.pl/statystyki/zakres/polska/> (accessed 20 February 2022).
3. Report on Foreigners in the Polish Social Insurance System 2020, https://www.zus.pl/documents/10182/2322024/Cudzoziemcy+w+polskim+systemie+ubezpieczeń+społecznych+-+wydanie+2021_v2.pdf/235779ba-d43e-6dcf-4540-6352eeef697f (accessed 20 February 2022).
4. The 'Pole's Card' – a document regulated by the act of 7 September 2007 on Pole's Card (Journal of Laws 2019, item 1598, with further novelisations). According to the law, the person who can prove their belonging to the Polish nation and meets specific requirements regulated in the act can benefit from a range of facilities such as the right to apply for a national visa / permanent residence / citizenship free of charge, grants them open and equal access to education, the labour market and health care in urgent situations.
5. Art. 4 point 3 of the Act of 6 March 2018 on the Terms on which Foreign Entrepreneurs and Other Foreign Persons May Participate in Economic Trade in the Territory of the Republic of Poland (Journal of Laws 2022, item 470). Types of economic activity in Poland, <https://www.biznes.gov.pl/en/firma/doing-business-in-poland/types-of-economic-activity-in-poland> (accessed 11 June 2022).
6. 'Poland's Migration Policy – Diagnosis of the Initial State', the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/polityka-migracyjna-polski--diagnoza-stanuwyjsciowego> (accessed 11 June 2022).
7. Database of enterprises and institutions recorded on the CEIDG, REGON and KRS registers, for which the code of the predominant type of activity according to the Polish Classification of Activities 2007 is 96.02.Z (Hairdressing and other beauty treatments), <https://www.bnf.pl/katalog/baza/baza-fryzjerow-i-kosmetyczek> (accessed 11 June 2022).
8. See 'The beauty sector during the pandemic. Cosmetics services market research', at https://www.beauty-forum.com.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/BEAUTY_FORUM/Badanie_rynku.pdf (accessed 31 August 2022).

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Living Here, Owning There? Transnational Property Ownership and Migrants' (Im)Mobility Considerations Beyond Return

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Migrants' property ownership in their countries of origin is often understood through the prism of return: both intended and actual return mobilities. Applying a transnational optic, this article unpacks the relationships between migrants' property ownership 'back home' and their reflections on future moves and stays, not limited to possible return. We draw on 80 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2020 with Polish and Romanian migrants living in Barcelona and Oslo. They left their homeland, sometimes following domestic migration or international migration to other countries, before arriving in Spain and Norway. Based on these case studies of East–West migration within Europe, we contribute to work recognising the ongoing complex and diversified nature of mobilities in Europe. First, we detail what migrants' property ownership looks like in practice – forms of ownership, types of property, location. Second, we focus on how owning property in Poland or Romania intersects with migrants' considerations about moving or staying in the future, beyond return. Considerations about future (im)mobility shed light on transnational relationships, as these evolve over time and across space. Furthermore, we find that transnational property ownership in their countries of origin reveals much about migrants' relations with people and places 'back home' and reflects the known non-linearity of migration stories. Overall, however, transnational property ownership is a poor predictor of both return plans and intentions.

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Keywords: return, (im)mobility, property, lifecourse, time, Poland, Romania

Introduction

This article starts from a conundrum which emerged from the analysis of our interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants about their transnational property ownership ‘back home’. The extant literature often connects migrants’ property ownership in places of origin with assumptions about planned return. Its most clear-cut version might be described as a ‘return hypothesis’, deemed to explain property ownership in countries of origin based on a simple economic calculus of migrants investing in property there as preparation for return (Anghel, Fauser and Boccagni 2019). Increasingly, however, it is recognised that this might be *intended* rather than *actual* return (Dalakoglou 2010; Gherghina and Ploeanu 2020) and that questions of return intentions are actually intimately bound up with the ‘myth of return’ (Anwar 1979), transnational ties more generally (Carling and Erdal 2014; Carling and Pettersen 2014) and integration processes in settlement contexts (de Haas and Fokkema 2011). Alternatively, these properties might be seen as ‘second homes’ located in countries of origin and somewhat akin to the ‘second home’ ownership of many Northern Europeans in Southern Europe (Fauser 2020). The literature thus indicates that migrants’ property ownership in countries of origin and their possible future return are connected in multidirectional and complex ways.

Our conundrum emanates from the ways in which migrants’ reflections about property ownership in Poland or Romania uncovered issues other than return and, when related to future mobility, revealed complex transnationally oriented considerations, including the option of immobility (Schewel 2020). With this article we shed light on the relationships governing transnational property ownership and our respondents’ reflections about return and other forms of future mobility or immobility, demonstrating that property ownership and considerations of return or future (im)mobility are often loosely connected and that the former is far from being a predictor of the latter two. Our aim is to answer the question: *How does transnational property ownership intersect with migrants’ reflections on their future mobility and immobility?*

To answer this question, we investigate what migrants’ transnational property ownership looks like in practice: geographical location, type of property owned (house, apartment, agricultural land), whether these properties are fully owned by migrants or co-owned with other family members and if (and how) the properties are currently used (e.g. renting). Then we turn to the question of how property ownership might be connected to migrants’ considerations about future mobility or immobility, including possible return. The analysis of migrants’ ownership of property ‘back home’ opens a window onto both the practical and the emotional dimensions of lives which straddle transnational social fields. Through this we are able to add fine-grained detail to the existing scholarship, carving out the particular roles of property, as distinct from, though embedded within, the much-rehearsed themes of home and belonging (Pauli and Bedorf 2018).

The data on which this article draws were collected as part of the DIASPOLitic project,¹ for which 80 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Polish and Romanian migrants in Barcelona (Spain) and Oslo (Norway) – 20 participants per subgroup. We systematically collected information about property ownership in Poland and Romania, asked participants to tell us their migration stories, discuss their lives in Barcelona and Oslo and share their reflections on future mobility and immobility, including possible return. Their reflections on properties ‘back home’ were also revealed as part of these more-open questions, where the topic emerged organically. Ours is not a strictly comparative study but we draw actively on two cases of Central and Eastern European migration.

Beyond the conceptual focus on property ownership ‘back home’ and its intersections with migrants’ future (im)mobility considerations, the article points to possible implications for these emigration contexts. This

relates to the impact that migrants' properties, often left empty or incomplete in the countries of origin, have on property markets, housing policies and links to the increasing home ownership–inequality nexus in Central and Eastern Europe. This is a dimension of questions about migrants' property ownership 'back home' which generally evades the attention of integration-focused migration studies with a settlement-context bias.

The article proceeds as follows: first we outline our theoretical points of departure, on home and belonging, transnational home-ownership and mobility/immobility. We then present the study's context and methods, including a brief overview of our sample, before the analysis, which consists of two sections (unpacking 'home ownership' and how this is connected to migrants' mobility/immobility considerations) and our conclusion.

Transnational property ownership: theoretical rooting

Though the material and emotional aspects of home are interconnected, the focus of this article is mostly on the material dimension – and we specifically analyse property ownership in countries of origin. By property we refer to housing – including the different types of property that migrants return to (e.g. farmhouses, cottages, flats, etc.).

Though we agree with Rytter (2019) that 'integration' is a term that needs challenging, here we understand integration as the ways in which the migrants themselves find their feet, to live their lives in their societies of settlement, whether helped by structural programmes or despite a lack or the inadequacies of such policies (Erdal 2013; Kivisto 2003). We recognise the relevance of interactions between transnational ties and processes of integration to the issues we discuss and that scholarship on migrants' home ownership in their societies of settlement, as part of research on migrant integration processes – including the barriers which migrants may face on housing markets (Firang 2019; Magnusson, Turner and Hedman 2014) – could well be further integrated with work on transnational property ownership. However, here we limit our contribution to the connections between migrants' home ownership transnationally and their reflections on their future mobility/immobility, including possible return.

Transnational property ownership

Our focus on migrants' home ownership is a transnational optic which is key to our article; this means that we adopt a transnational social fields approach (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Merla, Kilkey, Wilding and Baldassar 2021). Research has amply demonstrated that many migrants send remittances for purposes associated with housing construction, repairs, investment or the repayment of housing-related debt (Carling 2014; Smith and Mazzucato 2009). This is the case in empirical contexts around the world – from Ecuador to Pakistan, including in relation to Poland and Romania (Boccagni and Pérez Murcia 2020; Erdal 2014; Teodorescu 2018). Migrants' transnational home ownership has been an important topic over a long period, reflecting the fact that this is not a new phenomenon but one that spans what are often seen as different contexts globally (Boccagni 2016). Across these unique contexts, a pattern of similarity thus emerges – migrants invest financially in transnational housing projects (Boccagni and Erdal 2021).

Such transnational housing investments, sometimes referred to as 'remittances houses' (Anghel, Botezat, Coşciug, Manafi and Roman 2016; Lopez 2010), have been discussed in the literature on migrant transnationalism, with emphasis on how such property is important for issues of (continued) belonging to people, places and communities (Taylor 2015). Questions of belonging and the emotional dimensions of home ownership have also been linked with return intentions (Christie, Smith and Munro 2008). Meanwhile, return *intentions* are known to be a poor predictor of *actual* return and, instead, say more about questions of belonging, of a 'myth of return' (Anwar 1979) and of continued transnational ties, shedding light on investments which seem strange

if their rationale is assumed to be *actual* return migration (Wagner 2014). Simultaneously, connections are found in survey-based research between migrants' propensity to send remittances and their return intentions, reflecting stronger transnational attachments and generating greater expectations of return (Roman and Goschin 2012). Yet attachment can develop dynamically to span transnationally over multiple locations; attachment to the new place can also grow rapidly, thus becoming a decisive factor in migrants' considerations and decisions about returning, onward migrating or remaining (Trąbka 2019).

The existing scholarship can be strengthened through improving our understanding of the different forms which migrant transnational property-ownership investment takes. Property ownership forms and processes have different points of departure, relational dimensions, temporal frames and financial obligations, not least when understood transnationally, all of which we return to below.

Transnational property ownership can relate to different modes of acquisition; these include buying an existing property, inheriting a property or investing in the construction of a new property. Sometimes acquisition might take the form of adding an extension to a home – a floor or an annex. Ownership forms might also vary from single-person ownership, through to different forms of co-ownership, which might be more or less formalised – e.g. between children and parents, siblings or spouses/partners. With complex co-ownership structures, often changing over time in relation to negotiations over inheritance, conflicts can occur, as has been analysed in the British-Bangladeshi context (Miah 2021).

Boccagni and Erdal (2021) highlight how transnational investments might be made in different locations – from the ancestral village to a nearby town, a large city in the region or any other location. Furthermore, the purpose (planned use) of the property varies, including its use as a family home, a place to (possibly) return to, a place for relatives to stay, a holiday home or to rent out. There might also be different motivations for such investments, such as better-quality housing, social status, symbolic attachment, presence in absence, a cultural transfer to children or as a financial investment (2021: 1070).

When conceptualising property ownership from a transnational perspective, it is evident that it reflects transnational family ties as well as families' migratory patterns (Burrell 2017; Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Kilkey, Merla and Baldassar 2018; Merla *et al.* 2021). Thus, questions of ownership often involve people in multiple locations, set within transnational interpersonal relationships. Often, transnational home ownership is intertwined not only with financial issues but also with obligations and with care responsibility for elderly relatives, such that practical or financial and more emotional considerations interact in complex ways over time. This also underscores how property can mean many different things to different people – and how the transnational perspective helps to shed light on some of these meanings of property, depending on where one is located.

Mobility, immobility and return

While migration is a clear instance of human mobility, over time the degree to which migrants are mobile or not in their lives varies enormously. Economic considerations mean that most migrants, in fact, are not hyper-mobile but, rather, relatively sedentary in their day-to-day lives, even if life is pierced by international moves at several different junctures (Erdal 2021). This understanding of migrants as not necessarily always internationally mobile is relevant to our discussion of transnational housing ownership – where migrants, just like populations without migratory backgrounds, will span a continuum from highly mobile to highly immobile at different points in time (Wyss and Dahinden 2022). We understand mobility and immobility to include different degrees of choice and constraint (Schewel 2020).

Increasingly return migration is discussed both in ways that include a return movement from place A to place B – in a linear, permanent sense – and in ways that encompass the fluidity of return mobilities as

temporary or open-ended or where return visits replace more-permanent forms of return migration over time (King and Christou 2011). Indeed, return migration can only be understood through the consideration of a complex web of reasons. The existing scholarship usually explains migrants' return in relation to their (non-)integration in the destination country or by considering their ties with the origin country. While the first stream of literature links the return decision to unsuccessful integration in the settlement society, the second stream highlights three possible dimensions to migrants' reasons for return: belonging (e.g. identity, attachment, pride), connections (e.g. nostalgia, relationships, relatives) or presence (e.g. short visits, sending remittances, property ownership) (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016; Vlas 2013; Vlas and Voicu 2018).

The literature suggests that property ownership is a key factor that migrants take into account when planning and carrying out returns (Massey, Alarcon, Durand and González 1990). For instance, research on the Ghanaian context (Kuure, Arku, Luginaah, Buzzelli and Abada 2016; Owusu 1998) suggests that building and/or extending houses is one of the most important practices which returnees use to signal their intention to return 'home'. Similar findings were reached by Labrianidis and Kazazi (2006), who demonstrate that returnees also send financial remittances for building or renovating houses prior to actual return. However, the relationship between return and property ownership is not as direct as one would assume (Anniste and Tammaru 2014). For instance, migrants can also prolong their stays abroad in order to sustain the construction projects which they have back home, as Peil (1995) suggests.

There are several reasons why property ownership 'back home' is often seen in the existing scholarship as one of the most important factors which migrants take into consideration when contemplating return. One reason is the fact that having a place to return to can play an important role in easing reintegration in home societies (Labrianidis and Kazazi 2006; Vlas and Voicu 2018). Another reason is that houses back home can be used as places to stay for regular visits, hence allowing migrants to maintain ties with the country of origin (Wessendorf 2007). Yet another important reason, in addition to practical purposes (e.g. financial investment, holidays), is related to the way in which migrants maintain a 'symbolic' presence in their absence through transnational property ownership (Erdal 2012).

However, looking at return mobilities through a transnational optic necessarily complicates the return hypothesis. Contrasting earlier literature, where return migration was considered the final stage of the migration cycle, the current literature increasingly shows that migrants actively maintain ties that connect the origin and destination countries, while constantly reconsidering their future trajectories and the possibility to re-enter a migratory pathway (Anghel *et al.* 2019). For instance, as Kilkey and Ryan (2021) argue, *unsettling* events – or life-changing events for a migrant – may impact on their present experiences of migration and thus also on their plans for the future. This fluidity or open-endedness becomes even more visible in the context of the EU (and EEA), where the degree of free mobility which citizens enjoy is higher than that enjoyed by non-EU citizens and outside the EU (Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2018).

Methods and data

This article draws on an analysis of 80 semi-structured interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants in Barcelona (Spain) and Oslo (Norway), with 20 interviewees in each subgroup. We conducted the interviews between January and April 2020, mostly in person, with the remainder online (due to the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic). The research project actively adhered to the research ethics guidelines as set out by the Norwegian National Committee for Research ethics in the social sciences and the humanities, including voluntary and informed consent to participation, due consideration of data management and security, as well as active limitations on the collection and storage of personal data. All names used in the article are pseudonyms and not the interviewees' real names, in order to help maintain their anonymity.

Interviews with Polish migrants were conducted in Polish and those with migrants from Romania in Romanian. Both the in-person and the online interviews were recorded, transcribed in full and translated into English. By following the same interview guide that we collaboratively developed as a team before the data collection, we ensured that, overall, the quality of the online interviews did not substantially differ from that of the earlier in-person interviews. As these were the remaining few interviews carried out with each of the groups we worked with, the interviewers had already gained expertise and familiarity with the interview guide. It should also be noted that the guide was a semi-structured one, several themes of which were always covered. There was also an exercise designed to prompt interviewees, which may have been easier to use in online interviews. The interviews were all coded following the same codebook and based on thematic codes in NVivo software for qualitative data analysis.

Polish and Romanian migrant communities were chosen for our study due to their size and the scale of emigration from both countries. We opted for interviews with both groups in Barcelona (Spain) and Oslo (Norway), since Romanians are the largest EU migrant group in Spain, whereas Poles are the largest in Norway. At the time of our case-selection (2019), Romanians were the fifth largest EU migrant group in Norway and Poles the fifth-largest in Spain, thus in both cases relatively smaller, yet still significant. This article draws upon material gathered for the project looking at external voting participation among Central and Eastern European migrant populations in Western Europe.

Sample characteristics

The interviewees have diverse backgrounds, including their place of origin – which varies from Warsaw and Bucharest to rural districts – educational level, age, gender and migration experiences. Our sample is evenly divided between men and women in each of the four subgroups. The interviewees were predominately born in the 1980s, with a smaller group born in the 1970s: 10 interviewees were born in the 1990s and 6 in the 1960s or earlier. The majority of the interviewees hold only one citizenship: that of their country of origin. Only 4 interviewees hold dual citizenship of their country of origin and Spain or Norway.

The majority of the participants migrated to Spain and Norway after Poland's (2004) and Romania's (2007) accession to the European Union. Only 15 interviewees arrived in Spain or Norway prior to their country's EU access. In terms of transnational financial support, 74 of the 80 interviewees do not receive any form of regular support from Poland or Romania; however, 31 regularly send financial support back to people there. Among our interviewees, 32 own property in their country of origin; those who do mostly reside in Oslo (20). In a few instances, ownership is shared with other family members, while several other interviewees mention prospective ownership (e.g. future inheritances), which highlights the complexity of transnational co-ownership arrangements. In relation to their future plans for return, 18 of the 32 interviewees who own property in Romania or Poland have no intention of returning, while 7 have concrete plans to do so. The remaining 7 interviewees will consider the possibility of a return in the future but have no clear plans as yet. Regarding the place of origin, the majority of Romanian participants emigrated from smaller towns and rural districts while, for our Polish interviewees, the sample is more evenly balanced between those who come from urban and those from rural areas.

Transnational property ownership and future mobility considerations

We now present our data and analysis. First, we provide a brief contextualisation of the development of the housing market in Romania and Poland in the past three decades. Then we focus on the material aspects of property ownership, including the type of property owned, its current use, whether or not it is currently co-owned

with other family members and its location. Subsequently, we turn to how participants reflect on the idea of return to Poland and Romania and future (im)mobility considerations and whether or not these are connected to the ownership of properties ‘back home’. Together, these two analysis sections allow us to address our research question: How does owning property ‘back home’ intersect with migrants’ reflections on future (im)mobilities?

The contextual backdrop: Recent property developments in Poland and Romania

To better understand how property ownership in Poland and Romania may interact with questions of return, it is useful to provide a contextualisation of the recent development in the property markets in the two countries. In the last 30 years, two processes have influenced home-ownership dynamics: on the one hand, the privatisation of the housing market (which was controlled by the state prior to 1989), followed by its subsequent financialisation (Sikorska-Lewandowska 2021) and, on the other, the unequal development between large and secondary cities (Cristea, Mare, Moldovan, China, Farole, Vințan, Park, Garrett and Ionescu-Heroiu 2017), with the consequent internal migration from rural areas and smaller localities to bigger cities, coupled with external migration to European countries, both before and after the 2004–2007 EU expansion.

In the main cities, considered poles of economic development, homeownership has become a potential investment, too, while, in rural regions, small cities and post-industrial regions, a process of depopulation and emptying has taken place (Pusca 2010), with the consequent devaluation of properties (Sikorska-Lewandowska 2021). This leads to important inequalities, as many families do not have a mortgage capacity and are not able to buy a flat on the open market, while social housing is lacking and often in poor condition. Consequently, apartment ownership is highly valued in the Polish and Romanian moral economy (Fassin 2009). Although levels of ownership are relatively high (84.2 per cent in Poland and 94.7 per cent in Romania), there is shortage of apartments in the major cities, as they are considered a safe asset: in fact, the minority share of the population who have the means to do so, have been treating investing in property as a private form of hedging against uncertain future pensions (Pawłowski 2021).

Unpacking property ownership ‘back home’

Among our 80 interviewees, 32 owned property in Poland or Romania at the time of the interview; others have owned in the past or might in the future, thus allowing reflections from different vantage points. Of those who do own property, most own a flat or a house, with flats mostly found in cities and houses mostly in rural areas.

Some of the participants own two properties, usually a flat and a house in, respectively, an urban and a rural context. A few respondents also own a plot of land in the countryside or on the outskirts of smaller towns, where a prospective house may be built. We find that property ownership sometimes reflects migrants’ family past as well as current internal migration patterns within Poland and Romania: this is often reflected in the variegated patterns of shared or co-ownership (e.g. between siblings) or across generations, such as when those of the younger generation move to cities. Most of the property-owning migrants we interviewed own it independently. However, a handful of participants refer either to properties they will inherit in the future or to properties that are co-owned. Others refer to less-clear structures, where property ownership is described as co-managed by family members who have not migrated, such as parents or siblings, whereas the formal ownership (whose name is on deeds) is perhaps just one person. In our data we could not identify overt conflicts over property ownership although the outlines of potential, latent conflicts are sometimes present in these transnational family relationships and co-ownership structures.

A crucial aspect of property ownership is how the property is being used. We found that most of the properties owned by our interviewees are, in fact, left empty. This is more predominant among property-owning Romanian interviewees, whereas among the Polish respondents the picture is more mixed. Wojciech (aged 48; all names are pseudonyms), originally from rural Masovia and now resident in Oslo, exemplifies a common situation among our participants:

The house is empty in Poland because my daughters obviously never want to live there. The older daughter lives in Warsaw. So, they don't even want to look in that direction. But we let the house be there, because I need this comfort. I don't go to Poland often, once every two years, but when we go, I take my key, open my door and go to sleep in my bed. And I don't have to stay at a hotel or ask for help from my parents or in-laws – 'Can we stay overnight' or something? I have this psychological comfort, I have my place in the world.

Wojciech's house in Poland is left empty not only because of his own migration to Norway but also because of his daughters' relocation from rural Masovia to Warsaw. However, instead of renting the vacated building out, Wojciech prefers to keep it readily available for when he (seldom) travels back to Poland for family visits and holidays, avoiding the need to book a hotel or organise staying with family. The idea of property as 'psychological comfort', as Wojciech puts it, is a common thread in our dataset. In the literature, such reasoning for having a place to stay in the country of origin is common (see e.g. Dalakoglou 2010; Erdal 2012; Freeman 2013); however, little attention has been paid to *why* these properties are left empty – if indeed they are empty most of the time – and which considerations underlie this reality.

Monica (48), originally from Galaţi and now living in Barcelona, articulates her reasons – like Wojciech – for keeping her property in Bucharest empty:

I don't want to sell my flat in Bucharest, because it seems to me... I feel like it's my home base, it's the house that I have earned, it wasn't a gift from my parents, I paid for it, from my job in Bucharest, and I am very attached to it. It seems that, if I sell it, I'd sort of lose my footing somehow... It's my base, it's a base.

Therefore, not only is Monica emotionally attached to her flat but this attachment also constitutes 'a base' for when she travels back to Romania – therefore she keeps it empty. However, Monica's perspective adds nuance, in that the flat represents not only a form of comfort and practicality but also a symbol of her successful career progression prior to migrating to Spain. For Monica, her 'base' in Bucharest represents ontological security, as a migrant and as a person, transcending questions of belonging; however, it is interesting that she is among our interviewees who do not have any intentions of returning to live either in their property or in Romania at all.

Properties can thus represent both spaces which migrants can go to when they travel back 'home' for family visits or holidays and spaces of strong emotional attachment. Meanwhile, we find that both of these elements appear to work against the idea of migrants (or their families) renting the properties out. Simultaneously, it emerges from our data that some of the properties that migrants own have been left undeveloped for a long time or are too old and in need of renovation, thus remaining unfit for either renting out or indeed for the owners to move back to in the immediate future.

As the earlier literature has shown, we also find that the construction, extension or renovation of existing properties or the purchase of new properties may become a form of status symbol, a signifier of 'successful migration' to the rest of the community 'at home' (Boccagni and Erdal 2021; Page and Sunjo 2018). Newer properties, conversely, might represent forms of financial investment and modes of securing savings earned

from migration – in the form of transnational investments – the latter being particularly true for Polish and Romanian migrants resident in Oslo. This is an aspect of migrants' transnational property ownership which is, thus far, under-researched – not least in the context of intra-EU mobilities.

Location is an important determinant of how the property is managed and of how migrants relate to it transnationally. One of the key reasons for not renting properties out that emerged from our data is that these properties are located in regions of Poland and Romania that have witnessed considerable depopulation and in which the demand for renting is low or non-existent. This is not to say that the reasons for owning and modes of using properties discussed above do not apply in such contexts, e.g. as a holiday home or a 'safe space' in more existential terms. However, the question of why properties remain empty in regions characterised by ongoing depopulation is very different, compared to those in towns and especially larger cities.

The significance of location and type of property ownership is underscored in our data. This is the case especially for rural areas affected by depopulation, where migrants' property – whether family-owned, inherited or constructed – cannot in practice be rented out due to the non-existent demand. In contrast, property investments in cities can serve similar emotional purposes and as holiday homes, while simultaneously having the potential to be seen as financial investments, whether as savings or, in the shorter term, also as sources of income through renting out.

Yet, even among those who owned flats in cities, we found only a few instances of these being rented out and thus becoming a secondary source of income to top up salaries received in the country of settlement, especially among participants based in Barcelona. Not renting out was again often linked to migrants' desire to keep properties available for their own use, perhaps signalling the combined hassle of dealing with tenants and the flats not being free: the idea of renting out was not worth the potential income gained from it. Finally, property as investments also opens up the possibility of selling them, which can facilitate the onward movement of migrants who wish or plan to re-migrate to further destinations, thus adding a mobility dimension beyond return, as we expand on in the next section.

Property and future (im)mobility considerations

In this second analysis section we specifically address the connections between property ownership in countries of origin and migrants' (im)mobility considerations. As anticipated from what we know based on the literature (Gherghina and Ploeanu 2020; Roman and Goschin 2012), property ownership and return migration are linked in a multifaceted, non-causal and non-linear way, as this article fleshes out in relation to the Polish and Romanian contexts, while extending the gaze beyond return.

Of the 80 migrants we interviewed, only 10 had made concrete plans to return to Poland or Romania in the immediate future (these were mostly migrants living in Oslo). A few more expressed the possibility or wish to move back in the medium or longer term – so perhaps within the next 10 years or so – upon reaching a satisfactory personal economic status or upon retirement. Importantly, not all the migrants we spoke with – who had made concrete plans or who wished to return later – owned a property in Poland or Romania. In fact, some prospective future returnees were hoping or planning to buy property only after their return to their country of origin. Meanwhile, some of the migrants we interviewed had both past migration experiences in contexts other than Barcelona and Oslo and considered future mobility beyond staying or returning – including the possibility of onward migration instead.

To highlight the complex ways in which property ownership and considerations of future mobility are connected, here is a snapshot of our sample, which is intended to serve as an illustration and an invitation to reflect on the potentially complex and multi-directional links between transnational property ownership and future mobility and immobility considerations:

- 10 interviewees have concrete plans to return to Poland or Romania: 7 own property there, 3 do not.
- 8 interviewees would consider moving back at a later stage in life: 7 of them own property there, 1 does not.
- 62 interviewees do not want or plan to move back: 18 own property there, 44 do not.

How is property ownership connected to future (im)mobility considerations then? First, in our analysis, we note a distinction which pertains to issues of time: age (at the time of interview, and of migration), length of stay abroad, historical time in relation to experiences of post-communist transition in Poland and Romania, EU membership and the approach to intra-EU mobility. Overall, we find that the younger interviewees show more interest in their professional careers, economic position and mobility – which are perceived positively – including re-migration to another EU country. In the case of older interviewees, mobility was generally conceived more linearly, from the origin country to a destination country.

Second, considerations about a possible decision to return ‘home’ (or not) are shaped by a series of factors that emerge as salient alongside the matter of property ownership in Poland and Romania; in most cases they are seen as far more central than (possible) property ownership. Recurring themes in our dataset include the availability and quality of job opportunities, access to and provision of welfare and healthcare, education (higher education or public schooling for migrants’ children) and romantic connections in the case of migrants whose partners’ or spouses’ origins diverge from their own.

Andrei (34), originally from Bucharest and living in Barcelona, points precisely to the mix of family duties, job opportunities, overall quality of life and a not-ideal co-ownership of property ‘back home’ as factors leading him to decide to invest in a property in Spain and settling there long-term. He says:

I feel very good here. I see a future here. I want to buy a house soon. Basically, everything I wanted to do in Romania, I will do it here little by little. I haven't been in Romania in four years. Of course, it is our country and we will go back one day. I will go back to Romania, not right now because I have plans here, I have my family here, and I cannot leave my job to go back to Romania just because we have an apartment there that we all share (Mum, Dad, me and my brother) and a house in the village, that is it, nothing else.

Andrei thus co-owns two properties back in Romania yet, in his considerations about future (im)mobilities, he wants to settle in Barcelona in the short to mid term and also hopes to return to Romania in the longer term; however, his intention to return at some point to Romania is not related to the properties he co-owns. Rather than suggesting a facilitating role, these properties are referred to as facts connected with his non-migrant family relations, playing a limited role if any in his considerations of return.

Quality of life and, for some migrants, the social and political contexts in Poland and Romania compared to Norway and Spain, are aspects to be considered when reflecting on return or onward mobilities. Kasia (35) is the interviewee who has by far the most detailed plan for returning to Poland. Originally from Gliwice and now resident in Oslo, she has bought a flat in the city she migrated from, using savings from her job in Oslo, and her return is imminent, though with a caveat:

I have already found a flat, I'm from Gliwice, so southern Poland, and I have a flat there already and now I'm just waiting to see what will happen with this pandemic. (...) And what's happening in Poland really alarms me in the sense that I've always been engaged on the left side of politics... I've taken part in elections, for example, but also as an activist. I'm left-wing, women's rights, human rights, etc. So, the government of Poland is totally not my fairy tale.

Her worries about the political and economic management of the Covid-19 pandemic in Poland and what she sees as an increasingly hostile political environment there, are complicating her plans to return, reflecting the non-linearity and complexity of migrants' decision-making considerations about return.

In opposition to Kasia, we have the example of Andrea (42). Originally from Transylvania, she has been living in Barcelona for 20 years, and is married with two children. She openly states that she has no intention whatsoever of moving back to Romania: having a brother in Romania is not enough of a reason to move back. In fact, she has bought a flat in Barcelona and she articulates her wish to remain in Spain on the grounds of her children's present and future welfare and happiness, something she argues would not be possible to guarantee in Romania.

Furthermore, we also find that migrants – especially those from Poland living in Oslo – underscore the relative geographical proximity as a factor enabling 'transnational living', which means that a permanent relocation is rendered unnecessary (see also Carling, Erdal and Talleraas 2021). For migrants from both Poland and Romania who live in Barcelona, the city's pleasant climate, particularly in winter, is a factor central to considerations about return or onward mobility (especially at an older age or upon retirement), making leaving Barcelona less attractive.

However, for some migrants in Barcelona and Oslo, owning property in their cities of settlement is linked to their reflections on their future (im)mobilities and, more specifically, to a decision about where life is to be lived. As Kacper (39) states, life is to be lived here, in Barcelona, rather than there, in Wrocław, Poland:

I consciously sold the apartment I had in Poland and have one here now. That was a conscious moment of a conscious conversation with my parents, that I don't want to have anything in Poland also in terms of inheritance. My life is here. So, we have talked that through.

Kacper is an example of a migrant who does not consider return at all and who has also renounced any future property inheritance. This is a different example of how (im)mobility and property ownership can be connected in migrants' considerations about future (im)mobility – in Kacper's case, centring on staying in Barcelona. Like Kacper, Magdalena (37), who moved to Barcelona from Poland in 2017, has opted to give up on the family house she was supposed to inherit, by selling it and sharing the dividends with her mother: with her share of the money she bought a property in Barcelona. This move constituted a considerable downsizing, as the house she sold in Łódź was big and had a garden while, in Barcelona, she could only afford a small flat. However, she has no intention of moving back to Poland and made this clear to her family, who helped her to settle in Spain.

Given that 32 of our interviewees owned property in Poland or Romania and others had owned or might own property in the future, we had a rich set of data through which to explore connections between property ownership 'back home' and migrants considerations about future (im)mobilities – as set within their migration stories. We expected to find non-linear connections between transnational property ownership and future (im)mobility considerations: our expectations were confirmed, as property ownership 'back home' does not emerge as a predictor of return migration. We also recognise that, for many migrants, this is not a zero-sum game and ownership 'here' and 'there' transnationally can be understood quite differently, either linked to return plans or intentions or not linked at all. We have indeed presented findings which help to expand the multitude of ways in which these connections are made at both practical and emotional levels, with financial dimensions, as well as transnational family obligations, that need negotiation in the contexts of Polish and Romanian migration. Though we have opted to not systematically analyse property ownership in settlement contexts, we also see that migration leads to changes in how the meaning of property 'back home' is understood from a distance, as well as over time and at different life-cycle stages.

Conclusion

Drawing on our analysis, first, of what property ‘back home’ entails and, second, of connections between transnational property ownership and considerations about future (im)mobilities, three issues merit further discussion. Our analysis supports previous studies in underscoring the salience of transnational ties for many, but not all, migrants. For some migrants, transnational membership and belonging ‘back home’ matter and is materially represented through property ownership, whether in the village of origin or in the city in which they lived prior to emigration. However, the transnational dimension is often the clearest when it comes to forms of co-ownership, questions of inheritance or having a place to stay when visiting. These are practical issues set within transnational family relationships, where care for elderly parents is often intertwined with responsibility for family property.

Of course, life in the country of settlement shapes migrants’ considerations about future (im)mobilities significantly, albeit dependent on length of stay, types of education and work and, overall, integration in the sense of how migrants themselves adapt to and develop strategies to live their lives in societies of settlement. Questions of future (im)mobilities – thus of ‘Should I stay or should I go?’ – concern, on the one hand, ontological security and a sense of belonging and, on the other – more practically – how individuals manage risk and thus approach the task of securing resources to maintain a life in their place of choice or, in a few cases, enabling a transnational life, straddling societies both ‘here’ and ‘there’.

Our investigation of property ownership ‘back home’ and its connection with considerations about future (im)mobilities fleshes out the many ways in which ‘property’ matters beyond migrants’ return (intentions), highlighting the ambiguous connections between movement, belonging and property ownership. This relates to how return, intended or actual, is in reality more about ongoing transnational exchanges and interactions with relatives ‘back home’. Thus, property back home is important for understanding relations with people and places in countries of origin, as set within transnational relationships, whatever future (im)mobility considerations might be.

At the same time, considering property in conjunction with future (im)mobility, we find that migrants may actively opt out of owning property in places of origin, as a way of ‘cutting ties’. Yet, not owning property ‘back home’ might just as easily be tied to other possible explanations, such as not having the resources, prioritising differently or planning to invest in the future, perhaps even in conjunction with an intended return migration. Thus, our analysis suggests that the basic information about whether or not migrants own property back home ought to be approached with analytical care, in terms of what this might suggest, both for return (intentions) and questions of belonging.

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Many Mobile, Few Successful: Ethnicised Return in a Changing Romanian Context

Remus Gabriel Anghel*, Ovidiu Oltean**, Alina Petronela Silian***

This article contributes to the growing debate on reintegration and the positioning of returnees in their home societies. Increasingly, studies focus on returnees' agency in reintegration processes, their practices of mobility in return and their use of social capital and financial and social remittances acquired abroad. Much less analysed is how ethnicity influences such processes of return and experiences of reintegration. In this paper we examine how returnees belonging to different ethnic groups – Germans, Romanians and Roma – reintegrate in a Romanian multi-ethnic context with marked ethnic inequality and lasting segregation. Fieldwork was carried out in a town that has undergone massive changes in the past 30 years due to the combined effects of foreign direct investment and international migration. Economically, the town changed from a poor and decaying context, to one that was poor but developing and finally to one experiencing strong development. Using a modes-of-integration perspective and analysing returnees' reintegration and mobilities, we show how return evolved as an ethnicised process in different contexts of reception.

Keywords: return migration, contexts of reception, mobility, ethnicity, Romania

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Introduction

This article contributes to the growing debate on processes of reintegration and the positioning of returnees in developing societies (Kushminder 2017; Lietaert and Kushminder 2021). In line with recent debates in the literature on return migration, we consider that return and returnees' reintegration often occur in relation to their mobility and transnational practices – that is, not just as processes of permanent return and settlement (Sinatti 2011). We employ a modes-of-integration perspective and aim to go beyond individual cases in order to compare the return experiences of members of different ethnic groups. We analyse return processes in a Romanian multi-ethnic town, asking why return was so differently experienced by members of the three ethnic groups – Germans, Romanians and, especially, Roma. We look at return as an ethnicised process, a perspective that was less used in previous research.

The context of research was not randomly chosen. Romania is a multi-ethnic country and experienced large flows of migration and return (Sandu 2010). Sebeş, the town where our fieldwork was conducted, is also a magnet for incoming foreign direct investments in Romania and it became attractive for autochthonous investors, too. It is therefore expected that returnees in Sebeş would have more opportunities upon return than in other Romanian cities that offer fewer economic opportunities. It is also a town with strong ethnic inequality as it has a large, segregated and poor Roma community. Finally, international mobility and return are significant, thus enabling us to witness a variety of return experiences.

We carried out qualitative fieldwork in six successive periods between 2013 and 2021, which allowed us to observe and directly discuss the different return and reintegration strategies. The town went through dramatic economic changes and thus, based on interviewees' personal accounts, we divided the reintegration processes into three periods: the 1990s, the 2000s and the 2010s – which can be described using Portes' and Böröcz' (1989) terms of *decaying* (or hampering), *poor* (more neutral) and *prosperous* (or more advantageous). In what follows, we first set out the theoretical and empirical background to the paper, summarising recent debates on returnees' integration in general and on return to Romania in particular. Next, we introduce the methodology of our case study and then discuss comparatively how returnees with different ethnic backgrounds fare in the various contexts of reception by looking at their agency and practices of mobility.

Debating returnees' reintegration

The notion that the return of migrants to their home contexts is a natural and easy process has been criticised for some time now (Markowitz and Stefansson 2004). Return as reintegration acknowledges the fact that the return process, like that of migrants' adaptation in countries of destination, requires adjustments by returnees (Christou 2006) in that they must often alter their aspirations and strategies in response to the perceived changes at home. In this respect, the recent literature has started to interrogate and theorise the notion of reintegration, largely defined as an individualised process that people go through upon arriving back in their home societies (Kushminder 2017).

Reintegration is analysed as a multi-dimensional process of participation (Cassarino 2004; Lietaert and Kushminder 2021): economic – when returnees are able to sustain their livelihoods – social, cultural and political when they reconnect to their communities of origin and their relatives and friends, feel safe and have access to justice (Kushminder 2017). It is somewhat to be expected that the refugee and deportation literature should discuss reintegration difficulties, whereby refugees and deported migrants may face resentment and stigma, broken social ties (Nisrane, Morissens, Need and Torenvlied 2017), dangerous situations (Majidi 2021) or reluctant bureaucrats (Medina and Menjivar 2015). Studies have addressed the return of economic migrants from different perspectives. Within the debates on return and development, there prevails an optic whereby

returnees are often seen to have a privileged position *vis-à-vis* non-migrants, with the potential to become agents of development (Papademetriou and Martin 1991). At the same time, studies predominantly in economics, which interrogate the determinants of return migration from different theoretical perspectives (Constant 2020), focus on the returnees' entrepreneurship, use of remittances, employment and wage premiums (Hagan and Wassink 2020). However, the literature also points to strains, hindrances and ambiguities in their positioning at home, despite the return migrants very often being better-off than those left behind (King, Castaldo and Vullnetari 2011).

Debates on modes of reintegration go beyond individual experiences and discuss typologies of return experiences in respect to the duration of return, the differences between countries of origin and destination or the voluntariness of return (Kushminder 2017). Depending on the theoretical perspective informing this debate, return can be regarded as a failure – from a neoclassical perspective, where returnees aim at migrating and staying abroad – or as a success (Cerase 1974), from a new economics of migration perspective, where returnees migrate in order to acquire resources but their ultimate goal is to return home. If some typologies focus on the reintegration strategies of those better or less integrated (Kushminder 2017), others focus on feelings of familiarity with the context of return (Dzięglewski 2020).

A different approach is how return experiences vary in accordance with social categories such as age, gender or ethnicity. In this respect, studies show a variation in the return experiences with age. If, among adults, labour-market participation is paramount, among the elderly issues like health services, purchasing power and quality of life are decisive (Ciobanu and Ramos 2016). Similarly, children's return is shaped by their experiences in schools and peer socialisation (Vathi 2016). Furthermore, return is often considered a gendered process and women may encounter more difficulties than men if they are of working age (Vlase 2013) or if they are pensioners (Gualda and Escriva 2014). Thus far, ethnicity has not often been addressed in studies on return migration – with the exception of so-called ethnic return migration (Tsuda 2009). In the Romanian case, a few studies deal with the return of the Roma (Anghel 2019; Toma 2018) but less is known on how the members of different ethnic groups reintegrate comparatively.

Firstly, our understanding of returnees' reintegration recognises it as embedded within migrants' mobility projects and transnational practices (Sinatti 2011). Re-migration, in our understanding, is not a lack of reintegration and returnees can be involved in different forms of mobility while being simultaneously engaged in processes of reintegration. Therefore, we regard return as a differentiated practice – looking mostly at seasonal, temporary, long-term and permanent stays (King 1996). Some spend a more limited amount of time in the country of origin and re-migrate to countries of destination, while others attempt to resettle in the home country at a certain point in time. Secondly, we look at how returnees use their social capital, financial resources (remittances) and cultural capital (including social remittances) in order to renew ties with their social contacts, make investments and access local opportunities. Thirdly, we address returnees' agency within contexts of return. Observing how much the contexts changed, we use Portes and Böröcz's (1989) distinction between the different contexts of reception, from advantageous to handicapped (or adverse) and try to understand how returnees cope in such different contexts. Whereas Portes and Böröcz (1989) posit that economic, political and legal aspects of contexts of reception form certain coherent patterns, in this paper we focus on returnees' economic integration. Finally, while embracing a constructivist understanding of ethnicity (Brubaker 2006) we ask what migration and return opportunities are available for members of different ethnic groups and what strategies they employ upon return.

Below we provide an overview of Romanian return migration in light of the existing literature. We then introduce our case study and offer an analysis of how return is experienced by members of different ethnic groups and how changing contexts influence these reintegration processes. As our research was carried out in

a multi-ethnic context with strong ethnic inequality, we also address the broader relationship between migrants' reintegration, mobility and social inequality (here considering ethnicity).

Return migration in Romanian society

Since 1989, when state socialism collapsed, Romania has evolved to become a disembedded neoliberal policy regime, known as 'a low wage, low benefit country' (Ban 2016: 67). Throughout the 1990s it underwent heavy deindustrialisation, which left millions of laid-off workers attempting to make a decent living in Romania with hardly any alternatives. At the time, Western Europe restricted entrance to Romanian citizens, so emigration as an alternative was expensive and resulted in the migrants having an illegal status on the Western labour market. Throughout the 1990s, migration was represented by the migration of ethnic Germans and Hungarians and an increasing flow of irregular migrants from Romania. Ethnic Germans tended not to return and the return of Romanians was also low as labour migration was low (Anghel and Coşciug 2018).

In 2000, Romania became a candidate for the EU, which sent a positive signal to the multinationals looking to relocate or extend production units into cheaper and less-regulated labour markets. As multinationals were starting to arrive in Romania looking for well-qualified and cheap workers, these latter were gradually choosing to emigrate for better paid jobs in the West, as visa requirements were lifted for Romanian citizens in 2002. Romanian migration therefore grew substantially. This period of time witnessed high return rates, with one in two migrants returning within a decade of their departure (Ambrosini, Mayr, Peri and Radu 2012). The high percentage of return was also possible given the fact that new border regulations no longer hampered their mobility.

In 2007, Romania became an EU member state. As there were no legal restrictions to mobility, both migration and return developed, involving more than 20 per cent of the Romanian population, including many from the poorer segments of society (Anghel and Coşciug 2018; Sandu 2010). Stănculescu and Stoiciu (2012) mentioned that, between 2009 and 2010, 26 per cent of the households surveyed in a number of regions had migrant members and 4.5 per cent of them had returnees. Martin and Radu (2012) mentioned that the level of return in Romania was similar to that in other Eastern European countries – about 7.6 per cent of the active population. Therefore, studies on Romanian return migration indicate return as a consistent process that affects a large part of Romanian society.

Most of the studies on return migration in Romania were conducted in the last few years and debate the causes and patterns of return migration. They show that socio-economic and structural conditions are intertwined with emotional and cultural ties in motivating people to return. Studies identified perceptions of discrimination abroad, feelings of belonging or attachment to Romania or the place of origin and cost–benefit calculations as the most common drivers for return (Gherghina, Ploeanu and Necula 2020; Roman and Goschin 2012). The level of income abroad correlated inversely with the probability of return – the higher the income, the lower the likelihood of return (Roman and Goschin 2012). Return intentions were also positively influenced by migrants' transnationalism – their remitting behaviour (Roman and Goschin 2012) and regular visits to Romania and the existence of networks of friends and relatives (Gherghina and Ploeanu 2020).

Romanian returnees followed a variety of integration pathways back home. While many encountered adverse conditions, others found jobs or ended up as self-employed or entrepreneurs. Studies about returned entrepreneurs draw up typologies, look at how the returnees combined local and transnational opportunities (Anghel and Coşciug 2018) and analyse factors enhancing entrepreneurialism, such as the duration of migration (Anghel and Coşciug 2018; Croitoru 2020), their level of education, remittance savings, gender (Croitoru and Coşciug 2021) or human-capital accumulation during migration (Croitoru 2019). Whereas many of the entrepreneurs analysed in these studies were able to establish sufficient and constant incomes for their

families, others re-migrated – especially the self-employed (Croitoru and Coşciug 2021) – sometimes in spite of community social support (Tudor 2017).

Some studies portray a somewhat optimistic view of return migration in Romania and consider that returnees and their households benefited from migration: they enjoyed a wage premium upon return and brought back skills valued on the labour market (Martin and Radu 2012), while temporary migration had positive longer-term effects on skills and possibly drove wages up (Ambrosini *et al.* 2012). Other studies point to the difficulties encountered on the labour market and how returnees chose to re-migrate despite their emotional attachment to the country and place of origin (Apsîte-Beriña, Manea and Berzins 2020; Bermudez and Paraschivescu 2021). Other studies critically interrogate inequality in return migration, discussing the positions of women (Vlase 2013) or of the ethnic Roma (Anghel 2019), who tried to overcome the marginal positions to which they were relegated at home. They open up to debates not only about labour-market participation but also on returnees' positionalities with regard to local social hierarchies, values and social norms. Our article shares this critical perspective and interrogates processes of return and inequality in return among German, Romanian and Roma returnees, looking at different contexts of reception and at how returnees balance mobility and settling strategies.

Methodology

The empirical material used was collected between 2013 and 2021, divided into six periods of fieldwork of between three weeks and two months each. We identified the patterns of involvement of migrants with life at home and their possible effects on local communities. In order to have a broad and complex overview of return practices, we set the limits of stay abroad at a minimum of six months but set no limits on the number of years since return; nor did we insist that the return be regarded as permanent or temporary. Hypothesising that there would be some variation along ethnic lines, given the social composition of the town, we made a point of including in our target group people from all three main ethnic groups – Romanians, the Roma and Germans – and with different return experiences, whether self-employed, entrepreneurs, employed persons and unemployed, women or men. We interviewed both returnees and 'knowledgeable' people – that is, persons who had not migrated and therefore had good insights into the local social and economic dynamics. We conducted 37 interviews with 'non-migrants' – priests, headteachers, school mediators, town counsellors, teachers, persons active in business and youth associations – and occasionally family members of people who were still mobile. We asked them about migration and its effects on the town and how returnees fared upon return. We used the snowball technique to establish contacts and triangulated the information, allowing us to gain different angles to stories already told and to view some of them with circumspection – for instance information concerning events which occurred prior to our arrival and which were essential in understanding the present.

We interviewed 106 people in all (73 men and 33 women), of whom 58 were Romanian, 16 were German, 27 were Roma and 5 were immigrants from Germany, Austria, the UK and Italy. With several of our interviewees we developed a closer relationship and remained in contact over the years. Sixty-four of the interviews were returnees – people who had returned for more than just visits – who were attempting to remain in Romania for a longer period of time. The main destinations of migration were Germany (15), Spain (15), Italy (8), the UK (6), France (5), the Netherlands (2), Greece (2), the USA (2) and Switzerland (1). A further 8 had multiple destinations. The Romanians and Germans were more educated: 35 had tertiary education, 20 had finished high school and 19 vocational school. Among the Roma, only 2 completed high school, with many having a maximum of eight years' schooling. Of all our interviewees, 30 were entrepreneurs and self-employed, 29 were employed locally, 9 were students and 9 were retired. The rest were unemployed or worked abroad. Amongst the Roma, 6 were employed, 2 were entrepreneurs and 1 was a pensioner. The rest

had no regular employment in Romania. The length of stay abroad also varied among and within the ethnic groups. The Germans stayed the longest, with an average of 11.6 years and 6 out of 10 staying more than 10 years abroad. Among Romanians, 9 (out of 30) remained abroad for more than 10 years and had an overall average of 8 years abroad. The Roma were mostly involved in temporary mobility (14 out of 24) although 4 out of 24 spent more than 10 years abroad.

Most of the interviews lasted an hour and a half to two hours. We audio-recorded them, transcribed them *verbatim* and analysed them thematically, looking at categories of returnees and of return experiences. We also took detailed notes from *ad hoc* discussions and analysed them, together with the transcriptions of the interviews. Interviews with returnees were semi-structured, following the background of the person (the origins of the family, where s/he grew up, his/her education, job experiences prior to emigrating), migration (migration decisions, jobs and life abroad, length of stay, transnational relations and practices of mobility) and return (motivation, expectations and post-return economic reintegration and experiences, including transnational practices, re-migration). We also tried to gain a sense of the succession of personal events and how the economic and social contexts played out for them at the time. The examples we present in the sections in which we discuss the empirical evidence are based on patterns across interviews. We changed all names and personal details, while still trying to retain the voices of people who entrusted us with their stories.¹

The context of research

Our fieldwork was concentrated in the town of Sebeş, including its small satellite localities. Sebeş is a small multi-ethnic town in southern Transylvania in central Romania. Nowadays, it has a population of about 27,000 people, of whom the greatest majority are Romanians, followed by the Roma (4,000), Germans/Transylvanian Saxons (400) and a very small number of Hungarians. In Transylvania, belonging to one ethnic community or another was associated with a certain prestige and, in Sebeş, social hierarchies are still built on ethnicity as well as on social status. Romania is a multi-ethnic society that had historically large communities of Hungarians, Germans, Jews and Roma. Many have retained their ethnic identity, others have assimilated to different degrees and others emigrated. Just as elsewhere in Romania, most of the Germans from Sebeş emigrated, with the support of the German Federal Republic, during communism or immediately after its fall in December 1989. The Saxons' gradual departure from Sebeş left both Romanians and Roma with a sense of symbolic loss.

Before the 1989 change of political regime, Sebeş had a diversified industry, yet not large enough to absorb the entire labour reservoir. Despite the communist official ideology of jobs for all, in the 1980s unemployment was already starting to become a problem, especially for Roma youth. Coupled with dire food and heating shortages, it led to a tense social climate. The resentment among Romanians and Roma also escalated. The former blamed the failure of communism on the corruption and laziness of the Roma and tried to limit and control their use of the town's public spaces. The latter, historically discriminated against and marginalised, found themselves trapped between the locally shared rhetoric that described them as beneficiaries of communism and their everyday struggle to survive. The collapse of state socialism after 1989 only deepened the crisis, with the Roma being the first to lose their jobs followed by poor Romanians. Most of the ethnic Roma also live in a large and poor neighbourhood – having no proper utilities until a few years ago – are poorly educated and often unemployed.

As the local prestige is based on ethnicity, Romanians did not want to be associated with the Roma. Besides, for Romanians, local prestige was tied to entrepreneurship combined with ancestry, as one of our interviewees comments: 'One has a standing here if one runs one's own business and is from a good family'. The same is true for the Roma but for other reasons, as they have tried to emulate the Saxon tradership: 'When the communists made the land reform in 1945, they asked us [the Roma] if we wanted farming land, but we wanted

to be traders like the Saxons, not peasants like Romanians back then' (an elder in the Roma community). Entrepreneurship, as opposed to salaried blue-collar work – 'the taken-for-stupid man who works on a quota' – continues to be a measurement of success for the Roma, too. Referring now to local symbolic hierarchies, the Roma hold nuanced and situated views about Romanians, informed by the same criterion of success: a person may be deemed worthy of respect when s/he associated with a trade and business ethos as opposed to agricultural or blue-collar work. From our fieldwork, entrepreneurship emerges as the local measure of attainment for both wealth and social validation, a category that cuts across ethnic boundaries. The notion of success or of successful persons that we use in this paper derives from what local people considered 'successful' – usually entrepreneurs owning larger companies or those employed in managerial positions in them. Furthermore, what emerged from our interviews was the three-period division of postcommunism in economic terms (investments, wages, employment) and of migration patterns, each shaped by opportunities. The 1990s was a period in which the economy was in a state of collapse. In the 2000s, the economy began to recover, catering mainly for the national market; foreign investments started to be made in the town, creating jobs, although not so well-paid as to prevent many of the people from migrating. After 2002, migration also expanded as there were no longer any legal restrictions to mobility to EU countries. After the economic crisis of 2008–2009, the third period is when the local economy increasingly flourished, offering expanding opportunities to both remainers and returnees. In what follows we analyse the processes of return in these three time periods and explain how ethnicity played out in them.

The 1990s: return in a collapsing country

Migration to Western Europe was a 'natural' solution for many Romanians, Germans and Roma, although their migratory experiences differed. It was mainly ethnic Germans who were able to emigrate legally. Their move was swift – most of them left in the first two years after the change of regime. For Romanians, emigration was much more difficult, expensive and full of uncertainties, so their migration was far less intense. With even fewer resources than Romanians, only a very few Roma were able to emigrate and those who did returned home quickly after their migration projects failed.

This was a period with a small number of returnees to Sebeş. From among those who migrated to Germany and Western Europe there were, on the one hand, the Germans who still owned houses in the region and spent summers there and, on the other, a handful of people – Germans and Romanians – who returned to live in Sebeş on a permanent basis. Due to the fact that the research was conducted after 2010, we did not learn about many cases of re-migration in this time period but captured a few cases of initial failed return whereby returnees continued migrating for a number of years after returning again. For the returnees who remained, it was a period when they could invest their savings in property at extremely low prices – in some very few cases, they converted their wealth into successful businesses. Martin is one such an example. He is a German who migrated to Germany in 1987, where he spent five years and returned to Romania in 1993. He admits that he worked hard and fared quite well in Germany – but he did not feel at home: 'Although I spoke German and tried to work hard (...) I missed my place and the forests and hills [from here]'. His business assets were his savings and, as he said, with a few months' savings in Germany, one could buy a house in Romania. He returned for good with his entire family and ventured into the local hospitality industry, often catering for German tourists. Still today he passes, by local standards, as a well-off entrepreneur.

Another returnee, Dragoş, an ethnic Romanian, came back from the UK. During state socialism he mediated commercial contracts between the local leather factory and Western European clients. When socialism collapsed, he conducted business with the same factory, which ended up in private hands in the middle of the 1990s. Maintaining his market access in the UK, he took the opportunity to invest in production facilities in

several other local factories in Romania that were struggling to compete in a nascent open-market economy. However, because of the overwhelming lack of trust that was prevalent in this period and the drive of his associates for graft and rapid enrichment, he backed out – a scenario that was common back then in Romania. After a while, he opened his own leather factory and a tourist facility. Today he produces leather objects for both global fashion brands as well as mass-market Romanian and Italian brands.

The analysis of a few cases of return from the 1990s shows a highly selective emigration, little return and high benefits for some of those who, risking their savings, set foot in a newly emerging market with untapped opportunities. Reintegration strategies differed. In the case of Martin, he invested his remittances in properties and a business, while Dragoş used his market relations to benefit from local opportunities. In other cases, reintegration was realised as an alternation between stays and moves abroad – as was the case with some small-scale entrepreneurs and with German pensioners spending their summers in Romania. In this period, ethnicity played out particularly in the emigration of ethnic Germans who used the support of the German state, while the emigration of Romanians and the Roma was quite difficult and risky. Return was also ethnicised – Germans returned either as larger entrepreneurs or as returnees during summer vacations. There was a single case of a larger-scale Romanian entrepreneur who returned. Some other Romanians returned in the 1990s with the aim of setting up their businesses but re-migrated because of the still-difficult economic context.

The 2000s: return in a poor context

Consistent with the national trend, already towards the end of the 1990s a series of foreign investments were made in the town and local entrepreneurship started to take off, developing further throughout the 2000s. In the main, Italian and Austrian companies opened up factories in wood-processing, furniture, appliances and the leather and textile industry, while a series of Romanian companies opened up small-scale factories in the food industry, textiles and hospitality. Despite the growing job offers on the local market, salaries remained low – about 100 US dollars per month in 2002. The trend was ascendant, though, between 2002 and 2009, with a rapid appreciation of assets, an increase of salaries and a growing number of jobs.

This coincided with the growth of labour migration of ethnic Romanians. As, throughout Romania, emigration became less selective and more widespread, migrants went to Germany, France or Italy and, in smaller numbers, to Greece. Spain, however, was the main destination and Romanians accessed jobs through social networks, especially in the fast-growing secondary labour markets. Their incomes abroad were far superior to the wages at home. Return also became far more frequent and diversified. Marian, an ethnic Romanian, left initially for Italy and moved on to Spain. In 2009, the economic crisis and some health problems made him and his wife return to Romania, where they started a business in freight transportation – initially with only one truck and a hired driver – and constantly expanded it. Marian was largely satisfied with his return. He was far from being rich, he said, but lived comfortably and felt in control of his life.

With some small variations, Marian's trajectory is common for other Romanian returnees, too. George, for example, migrated repeatedly throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s and, just like Marian, started small, with a family bakery business. He secured the finances for the extension of the business by re-migrating several times. In 2005, he and his wife moved the production to a new building with brand new equipment and only then did they feel that it was safe to contract credits to increase production and open a couple of shops in the region. This was the moment when they decided to put an end to migration. In the meantime, salaries increased and the overall economic situation improved, which was visible particularly in the growth in consumption. Migration also opened up new markets abroad. George's company now sends traditional bread and baked desserts to Romanian shops in Spain. George and his wife managed to take advantage of their local assets, the remittances that George sent from Spain and the expansion of their market at home and abroad.

The difference in opportunities at home between the two periods – the 1990s and the 2000s – is captured in the story of Robert – another Romanian entrepreneur with migration experience in Germany and Spain. For about seven years in the 1990s, Robert worked in Germany in a car repair shop for three months each year. Apart from savings, he brought home second-hand cars which he sold for fairly good margins. With the money he earned, he started to build a house and took the first steps towards opening a car repair shop in Sebeş: ‘I wanted to be my own boss and have my own business. I thought that if you work for yourself and you work hard you will make it’. However, business was not great in the 1990s as purchasing power was plunging, so he saw no option but to prolong his migration career. For four years he worked in a car repair shop in Spain. He saw the economic situation in Romania improving and, in the mid-2000s, decided to return there and give his business a chance. He invested around 50,000 euros in his car repair shop, hired a helper and got back to business, building a good reputation for himself: his shop was brand new and equipped with modern tools and he was committed to delivering the same quality as abroad. Like Marian and George, Robert employed a temporary migration strategy throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, when economic opportunities were scarce. From among the ethnic Germans, there were only a few cases of returnees. Paul, who returned in the mid-2000s, took home some financial capital and carpentry skills, so he set up a carpentry shop with modern tools, computer-generated plans and a team of a dozen men. He soon made a name for himself as one of the best roofers in the region and the business expanded as the house construction and repair market in the area started to grow.

The improving economic and social context in the early to mid-2000s led to the emergence of a group of small-scale returnee entrepreneurs, mostly Romanians, although some of them were only just managing to make ends meet. Erica, the owner of a small kebab restaurant in the historic centre of town, had lived for more than 10 years in Spain, where she had worked in the hospitality industry. The economic crisis struck Spain and she and her husband were affected. When they returned to Romania, her husband and some associates started a business in transportation, while she opened a kebab shop in a rented restaurant, something she was familiar with from Spain. Yet she struggled, as returns and margins were low. Another friend of hers, Adrian, had also returned home once the crisis hit Spain. Before the crisis he had made some attempts to return and open his own business in Romania but he felt he could not provide properly for his family, who had to share the same house as his parents in downtown Sebeş so he remained mobile, repeatedly moving between Romania and Spain. He did not manage to make substantial investments upon return and somehow became stuck working alone as a self-employed informal plumber.

According to our fieldwork data, the ethnic composition of migration changed between 1990s and 2000s, as those who emigrated were now mostly Romanians and a small number of Roma. In comparison to the previous period, when few returnees invested their remittances and developed in a scarce but risky environment, the later returnees from this period encountered a still poor but enriched context with expanding opportunities. Return started to grow and diversify in this period. Some returned from Germany after a few years there, opening up small-scale businesses in services (carpenters), trade (with second-hand or consumption goods) or tourism. Others returned from Spain and entered the transportation business. Even though they accumulated sufficient remittances, their purchasing power decreased as Romanian assets appreciated several times compared to the previous period; however, they were able to profit from the wealthier consumption market that had developed in Romania. Other returnees who worked in Germany and Spain established small meat-processing plants supplying fresh meat products both to the local market and to some of the Romanian communities in Spain. These small businesses also grew due to the new opportunities in Romania, which decreased the role of financial remittances compared to the 1990s. While, in these cases, some returnees tended to be content with their achievements and were locally considered prosperous, others such as Erica and Adrian were somewhat dissatisfied and did not pass as successful even though they tended to stay put. In this period

there were also a number of returnees who took jobs locally although many preferred to remain mobile between Sebeş and different European destinations.

From the 2010s onwards: return in a more prosperous context

After the economic crisis of 2008–2009, foreign investments continued to come to Sebeş. Many individuals were also striving to develop their own businesses or work autonomously, with returnees among the most dynamic. The opening of a large gearbox factory by a German multinational company attracted employees from the entire region and set up higher salary expectations. Labour-market offers also improved locally. Romanians began to have diversified jobs although the Roma held out little hope of obtaining rewarding jobs. Some worked in the textile, leather and wood industries for a minimum monthly salary under what they described as ‘carceral’ conditions, some worked in the collection of scrap iron and others were employed by the municipality’s street-cleaning company. Several of them ran informal businesses like working in wrought iron or in construction or running very small shops in the Roma neighbourhood.

Ethnic patterns of migration and return changed significantly in this improved economic context. If, in the previous period, it was mainly Romanians who emigrated while most of the Roma lacked the resources for emigration, this time it was the Roma who were on the move in large numbers. The Roma’s migration was initially precarious, with people performing street jobs or occasional informal labour. Their stays lasted several months and were dispersed across many European countries, including France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain and Greece. Although most of them left temporarily, an increasing number succeeded in prolonging their labour contracts and residence abroad. Examples are Alexandru and Mioara, who settled in Germany, Alexandru working as a guard in an amusement park, while Mioara was a cook and waitress. Elena, another Roma woman, used her seamstress skills, acquired from her father, to secure a job in a small tailor’s shop in Spain. In more recent years though, Roma migration was directed towards France, with many more settling there for longer periods of time.

For the ethnic Romanians, return migration diversified even more than in the previous periods. We see diversity both in their strategies of adaptation and in how they fare – just as in the previous period, many of them remain caught up in temporary migration, some keeping their secured employment at home and supplementing their income by leaving for short-term work abroad. However, we also identified an ever-growing pool of those who felt that they could ‘manage’ in Romania for the moment, as either employees in well-paid jobs or owners of small-scale businesses. The smaller entrepreneurs worked alone or ran businesses with several employees. They were active in hospitality, small-scale services and construction work. Their return pathway was similar to those who had returned in the previous period, capitalising on their remittances and the prestige of the professionalism acquired while working abroad. They aimed mainly at keeping their businesses running and securing a decent income.

Then there is the category of those who saw themselves and were seen as successful businessmen who managed to combine different types of resource. Sebastian came back from Spain where he says he was the well-trusted administrator of holiday homes in a renowned tourist destination. He saw an opportunity to return and invest in a tourist residence. He combined his savings and finances from the business associates he met in Spain with the 40,000-euro funding from a Romanian government scheme to support returning migrants. In a different case, Lucian invested in a vineyard in a picturesque village close to Sebeş, while he ran his main business, together with his associates, in the automotive industry, 60 km away. Other successful returnees capitalised on their experience abroad to access middle- and upper-management positions in foreign companies in Sebeş or managed new foreign investments in town.

Unlike for the majority of Romanians, the return of the Roma was in most cases linked to their temporary migratory practices. People returned regularly and used the money earned abroad to pay their debts at home, support their households until the next trip abroad and invest in the new houses they were building in the extending Roma quarter. The conditions of return continued to be adverse for them. Salaries remained small for the positions they could occupy and even when they did qualify for better ones, they felt discriminated against. Therefore many tended to re-migrate. Comparing experiences abroad and at home, they felt even more deeply the discrimination against them in Romania and claimed that they should be treated as equals. Such claims were often accompanied by examples of how they had been treated in the past by the Romanian authorities, the managers in the companies they worked for or in their daily encounters. ‘There [i.e. abroad] you are treated like a human being, not like here’, stated Oana. Such statements were repeatedly rehearsed when returnees remembered their migration and labour experiences.

What characterises this period is that, in contrast to earlier ones, the poorest people were also able to move abroad and return, meaning that reintegration patterns therefore diversified even more than before. Many returnees attempted to become entrepreneurs by tapping into expanding opportunities at home, some more successfully than others. Compared to previous periods, financial remittances were less important for successful returnees, who could now access different sources of funds, such as private investments, European and national funds and access to companies investing in the region. Occupying managerial positions within these companies was also labelled as a success by the locals. Other returnees also started to take jobs locally, some of them well rewarded by local standards. Access to good jobs was often mediated by acquaintances and usually taken by well-connected Romanians. The Roma and poor Romanians had low-paid jobs, often irregular for the Roma, so many took temporary jobs abroad in order to supplement their incomes. Therefore, those without regular employment or on low salaries continued to be mobile as part of their reintegration strategies.

Conclusion

Recent debates on returnees’ reintegration discuss their labour-market participation often from a perspective in which their accumulated remittances and the knowledge acquired abroad can enhance their overall economic performance (Hagan and Wassink 2020). Different studies discuss the position of women and of men upon return (Vlase 2013) or the return and economic performance of members of certain ethnic minorities, such as the Roma (Anghel 2019; Toma 2018). In this study we analyse returnees’ reintegration as an *ethnicised process*, by looking comparatively at how Germans, Romanians and Roma re-integrate economically. Comparing these cases, we noted that ethnicity first provided differentiated access to international migration. Ethnic Germans were privileged and were the first to move to Germany. Ten years later Romanians moved as labour migrants and after 2010 the Roma moved as more precarious migrants. There were very few Germans who returned as entrepreneurs with larger or medium-sized companies and more who spent summer vacations in Romania. The return of Romanians was more diversified. There were a few who became larger-scale entrepreneurs, either using the opportunities available in the 1990s or afterwards when the consumption market grew and diversified. There was also a category of Romanian small-scale companies which were opened up by returnees in services, hospitality, production and so on. Some others took jobs, including managerial ones, in multinational companies. Besides this, there were also Romanians who maintained practices of mobility abroad in order to make ends meet. The Roma were the most disadvantaged. They were the last to migrate as they had fewer resources and were not included in the migration networks of Romanians. Their return was tied to mobility – some still having jobs in Sebeş, some others failing to land a job despite many attempts. Among the Roma there was only one case of a returnee entrepreneur – in general they took on salaried or informal

work. Most remained mobile, as they faced poverty at home. The way in which members of the different ethnic groups re-integrated reinforced local ethnic stratification, with the Roma being on the lowest rungs.

In each of these three periods, returnees from our case study could be grouped into ‘successful’ Germans and Romanians – prosperous entrepreneurs and employed managers in international companies; ‘not successful but earning enough’ – the self-employed or employed, usually Romanians; and ‘mobile’ – some making ends meet and many others, such as the Roma, scarcely able to escape poverty. Success in return was perceived to be based on returnees’ positions back home and not in relation to the goal of migration – return or settlement abroad (Cerase 1974). What is more, ethnicity also played a central role in the local hierarchy of prestige, with Germans and Romanians at the top, followed by the Roma, who were vulnerable and socially excluded. This ethnic hierarchy played out not only symbolically but also in practices of inclusion and exclusion on the labour market and access to opportunities, where the Roma were the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, unlike the Romanians, who could use their social capital to access opportunities. In Table 1 in Annex 1 we summarise the economic positions occupied by the interviewed returnees.

The return migration of members of the different ethnic groups evolved in relation to the various contexts of reception (Cassarino 2004), influencing returnees’ use of remittances and mobility. In the first, the *decaying context* (Portes and Böröcz 1989), mobility was low but returnees had the advantage of getting a good deal for their money by investing in properties whose value skyrocketed in the next decades. Some others were not able to make ends meet and chose to re-migrate. In the *poor context*, there were no legal barrier to mobility and there was more return. There was rapid growth in the consumption market and more business opportunities. More returnees were able to gain a foothold on the market ladder as entrepreneurs, many maintaining the same line of activity as abroad, making the most of the acquired skills – what Hagan and Wassink (2020) call ‘occupational channelling’. They opened up cafés, restaurants, small construction businesses, car-repair shops and other service companies. Many of them, however, whether entrepreneurs or not, maintained their mobility in order to overcome difficulties and minimise the risks related to running businesses in a poor economic environment. The purchasing power of remittances declined; however savings from abroad still offered a good start when setting up small businesses.

In the third – *more prosperous* – context, migration became available to everyone who wanted to migrate, including the poorest. Return further developed and diversified. As Romania was an EU country, new sources of funds became available for would-be entrepreneurs and trusted managers: new industrial investments needed managers, European funds were offered for small-scale companies or for returnee entrepreneurs and some private investors sought new opportunities. This time the most successful were those able to access these funds and bring aboard potential investors. Small-scale returnee entrepreneurs also continued to come but in a more competitive context. Only in the advantaged context did the higher level of salaries start to attract more returnees, including those aiming to take jobs locally. If, in the previous periods, mobility was an important resource that those set to return could draw on until they were able to realise their return plans, in the *prosperous context* it was the poor, such as the Roma, who continued to vacillate between Sebeş and different destinations abroad. Remittances were used for investments in the first two periods – less so afterwards – and for consumption throughout all the years. Know-how, skills and foreign connections remain equally important throughout the three contexts – however it was mainly Germans and Romanians who used them. This variation in contexts thus provides the grounds for an explanation of why and how the process of return was so differently experienced by the members of the three ethnic groups. This made us reflect not just on how return is experienced in divided societies, here based on ethnicity; seeing how differently returnees fare and use remittances and mobility in different contexts emphasises the need to locate return processes within broader political and economic processes.

Notes

1. During the research we ensured the anonymity of the participants. We followed the research ethics strategy of the project ReturnITA where we detailed the ethical principles and practices of the project, https://returnita.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/returnita_strategia_de_etica.pdf.


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Annex 1

Table 1. Patterns of ethnicised return in Sebeș

Ethnicity/Period	Germans	Romanians	Roma
1990s	Little return made of lifestyle returnees and a few successful entrepreneurs	Little return One successful entrepreneur Some small scale mobile entrepreneurs	Almost no return
2000s	A few returned entrepreneurs	Some small and medium scale entrepreneurs Mobile returnees	Almost no return
2010s		Stronger return More returned entrepreneurs Some taking good jobs locally Some poor mobile returnees	Strong return linked with mobility No entrepreneurs

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To Be or Not To Be a Samsar: Motivations for Entrepreneurship among Romanian Returnees Involved in the Transnational Trade in Used Vehicles

Anatolie Coşciug* 

Whilst the extant scholarship offers a detailed exploration of why return migrants enter self-employment or engage in business initiatives in general, we know relatively little about their involvement in transnational economic activities which connect the previous destination country with the origin one and how they compare to other kinds of entrepreneurial venture in this vein. This article aims to understand these motivations by using insights from 50 semi-structured interviews conducted with traders of used cars imported in Romania, a mass phenomenon in the Central and Eastern European area and beyond. An important result of this research is that entrepreneurs have to consider a multitude of factors in multiple locations when entering the used-car business. The article also suggests that entrepreneurial motivations among used-car traders are not fixed but, rather, can and do change over time.

Keywords: return migration, transnationalism, entrepreneurship motivation, used-car trade, Romania, East–West migration

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Introduction and literature overview

‘I am not a samsar¹ – I wasn’t starving abroad and [as a result] had to return back to Romania to sell wrecks and cheat clients’. This informative remark was stated by Ion, a used-car trader, in response to a client negotiating a lower price. The statement also brings out the central theme of this paper: return migrants’ motivations to enter the trade with imported second-hand cars in Romania. The existing literature shows that there can be multiple motivations behind return migrants’ business endeavour – such as individuals who embrace an entrepreneurship trajectory out of economic necessity, those who embrace entrepreneurship because of the potential market opportunities and individuals who have other motives (Acs, Desai and Hessels 2008; Reynolds, Bygrave, Autio, Cox and Hay 2002).

Yet the growing body of research on return migrants’ business motivations studies mainly the origin-country context (Garc, Luc and Padilla-Angulo 2020; Lundberg and Rehnfors 2018) while overlooking the returnees involved in transnational economic activities (Gruenhagen, Davidsson and Sawang 2020; Zapata-Barrero and Rezaei 2020). Therefore, this paper aims to better understand how the decision to establish a new business endeavour is taken and whether the main motives for entering the trade with used cars are necessity-driven, opportunity-driven or have other incentives, using insights from 50 semi-structured interviews conducted with traders of used cars imported in Romania.

Understanding the various motivations for entrepreneurship among returnees involved in transnational trade deserves closer attention for several reasons. First, the returnees involved in transnational businesses might have different reasons for initiating entrepreneurship when compared to other types of migrant entrepreneur. The existing literature already highlights that return-migrant entrepreneurs are doubly self-selected – at the initial emigration and at the return stage (Batista, McIndoe-Calder and Vincente 2017) – which hints at their potentially distinctive characteristics when compared to other migrant entrepreneurs. Furthermore, these characteristics are even more relevant if one considers the existing scholarship which highlights the self-selection problem among transnational entrepreneurs in general (Brzozowski, Cucculelli and Surdej 2017; Drori, Honig and Wright 2009).

Second, considering that, by definition, transnational entrepreneurs operate across country borders (Solano 2020), it is worth asking how returnees navigate between national contexts rather than within the same country and how this, in turn, can ‘push’ or ‘pull’ them towards entrepreneurship. In so doing we can also better understand how the reasons for conducting transnational trade with used cars compare with other kinds of entrepreneurial venture managed by return migrants.

Third, the typology and the reasons behind entrepreneurship motivation can be very important when discussing the impact of migrant entrepreneurship on the development/transformation/social change potential in origin countries (Kelly 2020; Monti and Serrano 2021; King and Kuschminder 2022). The existing research suggests that opportunity-driven return entrepreneurs are more likely to own bigger companies, to employ more people, to unfold different management strategies, to have higher aspiration levels or to use more from their migration-related experience (Barjaba 2018; Croitoru 2019; Bloh, Mandakovic, Apablaza, Amorós and Sternberg 2020; Klagge and Klein-Hitpaß 2010) but we do not know if this is also the case with the transnational businesses operated by return migrants. With increasing interest in this topic in Romania (Şerban and Croitoru 2018) and beyond (Barjaba 2018; Bloh *et al.* 2020), acknowledging that migrants can be involved in transnational businesses after their return and understanding their potential impact could be essential factors for better public policies.

Fourth, the trade in imported used cars from Western Europe seems to be a promising venture through which to analyse the motivation for entrepreneurship among returnees, as this is a business that has greatly developed in recent decades in Romania and beyond (Beuving 2006; Brooks 2012; Kołsut 2020; Kołsut and

Stryjakiewicz 2021; Rosenfeld 2012), including a significant share of (return) migrants. However, few studies deal with the used-car topic in relation to migration, return or transnational entrepreneurship.

Undoubtedly, migrant entrepreneurs can have multiple motivations behind their business endeavours. For instance, they can directly experience various push and pull factors which lead to the decision to engage in different occupational trajectories. One of the most important ways in which the academic scholarship unfolds the individuals' motivation to enter entrepreneurship is by distinguishing between necessity-, opportunity- and mixed-motivated entrepreneurs and the reasoning and outcome behind each of these typologies. Thus, it is acknowledged that necessity-driven entrepreneurs tend to establish a new business venture mainly to escape unemployment. By contrast, opportunity-driven entrepreneurs are seen as individuals taking advantage of various potential market opportunities (Acs *et al.* 2008; Reynolds *et al.* 2002).

More specifically, for the category of necessity-driven entrepreneurs, Barjaba (2018) mentions aspects such as a lack of employment opportunities, discrimination or overqualification as important 'push' factors among return migrants. In addition, Croitoru and Coşciug (2021) highlight that factors related to both the origin and the destination country can be relevant when considering the 'push' factors among returnees. For the category of opportunity-driven entrepreneurs, factors such as new ideas and skills brought back from a previous migration experience as well as transnational connections, are usually mentioned (Black and Castaldo 2009). In terms of reasons which go beyond the opportunity–necessity dichotomy, several studies show, for instance, that women were found to have a lesser likelihood of becoming entrepreneurs after return (Croitoru 2020; Martin and Radu 2012).

Similar typologies and explanations are also used for the transnational entrepreneurs. The existing literature suggests that migrants can create new transnational businesses using their unique mix of skills and embeddedness in two different national contexts. Furthermore, engaging in transnational businesses was also found to be associated with the level of diversity among entrepreneurs' social networks, the type and amount of social capital available to the entrepreneurs and the level of exposure to different settings, contexts or markets (Brzozowski *et al.* 2017; Rusinovic 2008).

Methods

The design of this article is based on the research principles of multi-sited ethnography (Falzon 2016; Marcus 1995), following the second-hand cars through all the geographical and virtual spaces they pass from the source to the destination. Therefore, the research design includes data collection (in-depth interviews and participant observation) in the importation (Romania), exportation (Germany, the UK, Belgium etc.) and transit countries (Hungary, Slovakia etc.) as well as in various virtual spaces (dedicated web platforms etc.).

The study is based on face-to-face interviews with 50 people involved in the trade in imported second-hand cars who have a migration background, usually in the country from where the second-hand cars are imported. When the interviews were conducted, all the participants had returned to Romania at least a year earlier, while the most distant return took place about 10 years before. The interviewees lived abroad for at least one year, while several traders have lived in other countries for more than 10 years. In a similar manner, most of the interviewees have lived in one country, while several have migration experience in multiple destinations. All interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2018, in Romanian, and took on average between 30 minutes and two hours. An interview guide was used to cover topics such as their socio-economic background, emigration and return experience, life trajectories, etc. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and a thematic coding was undertaken, using ATLAS.ti software, for the analysis.

Interviewees were identified through both snowball and purposive sampling in Romania and abroad (Babbie 2016; Creswell 2014). The recruitment process started from several entry points in order to generate

as many immigration, return and entrepreneurial trajectories as possible. For the research carried out in this paper I used four entry points: a group of entrepreneurs in the area around Osertown (a pseudonym), one of the largest cities in Romania and located in the region of Transylvania; the second-hand car market situated on the outskirts Osertown, probably the largest such market in Romania and one of the largest in the CEE region; a second-hand car market situated in Berlin, one of the most important cities for this kind of trade in Europe; and a religious community stretching between the UK and Romania.

All the returnee entrepreneurs interviewed in this study were men – one of the main characteristics of the cross-border second-hand-car trade in Romania and beyond (Beuving 2006; Brooks 2012; Rosenfeld 2012). Most were middle-aged and had a medium level of education (high school or vocational education and training – VET), two had less than a high-school education while three had university degrees. In terms of the number of employees, most of them worked alone or together with other family members. It is relatively common for men to receive support from their wives or life partners or siblings – at least in parts of the trading process. Just three entrepreneurs employed non-family members to carry out elements of the importation process.

This paper actively adhered to the research ethics guidelines, as set out by the *Babeş-Bolyai University Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*, including, but not limited to, the voluntary and informed consent for participation, data security, and/or active limitations on the collection and storage of personal data.

Research context

No coherent or commonly accepted definition for return migration exists thus far. The current meanings refer to a variety of individuals who return to their actual or perceived origin country at various moments in their life and for diverse purposes – such as retirement, work or investment opportunities, life-style or failure in their emigration situation. While some migrants return permanently, many return temporarily and this dimension, in particular, sparks many debates (Anghel, Fauser and Boccagni 2019). To further blur the concept, many of the returnees do not go back necessarily from the initial emigration destination or into the same community as the one from which they left; they may also return to an ‘imagined’ homeland, as is the case for the second generation (King and Kuschminder 2022). These concurrent definitions of who returnees are can create much confusion, especially when attempting to estimate the composition and size of the phenomenon (Carling, Mortensen and Wu 2011). This confusion is even more noticeable in the Romanian case, where the individuals migrating abroad do not have to declare it to the authorities (such as deregistering from their previous residence) and the existing statistics/projections use a variety of operational definitions (Ciobanu and Bolzman 2020; Croitoru 2020; Kordel and Lutsch 2018). For practical reasons we use the United Nations (1998) definition of return migrants – one of the most common definitions used in academic research:

Persons returning to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short-term or long-term) in another country and who are intending to stay in their own country for at least a year.

Recent studies estimate that there is a Romanian diaspora of about 4 million people and that around 1 in 5 of the 20 million Romanian citizens have at least one migration experience (Botezat and Moraru 2020; Ducu 2018; Oltean, Anghel and Schuster 2017; Vlase and Voicu 2018). Due to the relatively high diversity and complexity of the country’s migration flows, no consistent data on return migration are available for Romania. Several estimates suggest that only a modest fraction of emigrants have returned home. Martin and Radu (2012) hint at a return rate of 7–8 per cent while Stănculescu and Stoiciu (2012) report that 4.5 per cent of households have at least one returned family member. Even if return migration was relatively small in scale

a decade ago, nowadays Romania appears to be experiencing an increasing and ongoing (transnational) return of migrants (OECD 2019).

Among the recent flows of returnees going back to Romania, entrepreneurship seems to be a relatively widespread phenomenon. Croitoru and Coşciug (2021) found in a survey that returnee entrepreneurship concerns around 8–9 per cent of the total sample of returnees and around 14–15 per cent of returnees exhibit an intention to invest in an economic venture in the future. In a similar fashion, an OECD (2019) study shows that the share of self-employed is 13 per cent higher among low-educated return migrants compared with low-educated non-migrants. Several existing studies dealing with the topic of entrepreneurship among migrants in Romania (Anghel, Botezat, Coşciug, Manafi and Roman 2016; Croitoru and Coşciug 2021) and beyond (Sinatti 2019) report that some of the returnees included in their studies are not ‘typical return migrants’ as they are usually defined in the scholarship (Cassarino 2004; King and Kuschminder 2022). Such a situation was also encountered in this research, where several participants reported that they migrated with the initial plan of acquiring a sufficient level of financial and social remittances to set up transnational business, such as the trade in used cars.

Regardless of whether or not they had well-planned migration trajectories, returnees can be observed in various business activities in Romania, from coffee shops and restaurants to food and textile factories or IT companies (Kordel and Lutsch 2018; Şerban and Croitoru 2018; Vlase 2013). The trade in second-hand cars is also a relatively widespread activity among return migrants in Romania but no statistics could be obtained about the precise number of them for several reasons. First, Romania is part of the European Union (EU) and, considering the EU’s principle of the free movement of persons, money and goods, the importation of second-hand vehicles is not subject to any specific taxation or institutional control in the origin, transit or destination countries (European Commission 2012). Second, the importation of used vehicles is mainly a small-scale business in Romania with usually only one person involved in the trade and just a few other persons engaged in parts of the process (such as repairing or transporting the vehicles). However, Croitoru and Coşciug (2021) suggest that 15–20 per cent of the return migrants participating in their survey are or were, at a certain point in their career, involved in the used-car trade.

Unpacking entrepreneurship motivations among traders of imported used cars in Romania

As discussed in the introduction, the existing literature on entrepreneurship motivation among returnees shows that they seem to be ‘pushed’ or ‘pulled’ onto entrepreneurship trajectories or to have multiple motivations. The following sections present these categories of necessity-, opportunity- and mixed-motivation entrepreneurs while highlighting the transnational contexts in which they unfold.

Necessity-driven entrepreneurs

About a third of the participants in this research fall into the category of necessity-driven entrepreneurs, meaning that returnees’ establishment of businesses selling imported used vehicles was mainly a result of various constraints rather than something to which they aspired. Several individuals in this category seemed to face difficulties in either the origin or the destination country or both, which, in turn, ‘pushed’ them towards the trade in used cars.

Lacking the requisite networks and being unable to secure the desired jobs were among the main reasons highlighted during the interviews in relation to both origin and destination country. For instance, Mihai² is a former migrant to Switzerland who detailed how he had difficulties in accessing a job as a firefighter back

home in Romania. During the interview he mentioned that, after returning to Romania, he applied twice for this position but was rejected because he lacked the relevant political connections.

(...) if one doesn't know the right people or if one doesn't do favours to those who have the power, one doesn't stand a chance to get those jobs (...) [Rejection] was a shock for me, I returned home specifically for this job and couldn't see myself doing anything else in Romania.

While waiting to apply for the second time for the firefighter position, Mihai also tried other jobs in Romania. For instance, he also worked for a short time as a taxi driver – until he realised the ‘informal working conditions’ in the field – and later as a ‘partner’ in a ride-sharing company with his own car. However, he understood that the income obtained from the ride-sharing activity was not sufficient when he had to sell his car to pay for an unexpected expense:

I urgently needed some cash for my mother's medical expenses... It was a surprise how fast I sold it (...) the next day after I posted an ad in the [name of a newspaper] several people called and the same day it was already sold (...) at a price almost double the one I paid [in Switzerland] the year before.

Several weeks after selling the car, Mihai applied and was rejected for the second time for the firefighter job. With this refusal and his mother out of the hospital, he decided to re-migrate to Switzerland. However, he found a different context there compared with the one he left more than a year before – employers were more reluctant to hire foreign workers not registered in Switzerland after the 2014 referendum against ‘mass immigration’. After several unsuccessful attempts to secure conventional (satisfying) employment, including at his former workplace, he decided to return to Romania. He initially planned to invest in a small farm with his family in a village near their hometown. To do so, he bought a second-hand car in Switzerland and filled it with used items, such as furniture, sports equipment and electronics, to be sold after his return to Romania to ‘cover some of the financial losses’ he had by going to and staying in Switzerland. He recalls during the interview that after selling the used items brought back from Switzerland, he realised that this could be an activity which could be turned into a viable business and therefore postponed the farming idea:

I wasn't aware of the number of cars brought from abroad and how many potential customers there are. (...) The [used car] market was full of clients; I sold the car in the first hour. (...) The Oser [used-goods market] was crowded with many used goods but I sold everything I took because it was from Switzerland. (...) I started considering it as a serious activity and an honest source of income.

Like Mihai, several other entrepreneurs explained that becoming traders in used vehicles was not something to which they initially aspired but was, rather, a form of self-defence against the harsh conditions in the labour market which ‘pushed’ them along this entrepreneurship path. Besides the lack of access to networks and not adapting to the job market, several participants also mentioned the factor of discrimination. For instance, it was reported in several interviews that native workers tend to have much higher wages and better working conditions than other migrants in the same job – as in the case of Marius, who was working as an electrician in Germany:

(...) all foreigners were self-employed, paid by the meter, and had to work 10–11 hours per day with half an hour break, six days per week to get a decent income (...) The German workers employed in the company had higher salaries, a 7–16 working schedule, one hour lunch break, a lot of free days, and work only

5 days per week (...). We were engineers while they had, in the best case scenario, a hochschule [vocational] level [qualification].

Discrimination in the German labour market was not the only factor inciting Marius to switch to the trade in used vehicles. He returned from Germany to work for one of the supermarket chains operating in Romania which has an important regional logistic deposit open in his hometown. However, he quit within several weeks after realising that he could not use his pre-migration education as he had been promised when applying for the job:

I was employed as an electrician, I had to do maintenance and repair (...) they promised a job as an electrical engineer, that was my basic formation. (...) I have been told that I need previous experience as an engineer, preferably in Romania, to hire me as an engineer there...

In this context, Marius considered that he faced discrimination in both his origin and destination country and he saw the trade in second-hand cars as a way of restoring his economic and social status. During the interview, he emphasised how his negative experience on the labour market in Germany and Romania was not something that his ego could tolerate for too long, especially ‘after investing so many resources’ in his education and the extensive work experience he had in the field. In his case, exploring the trade in used cars seemed to be a path towards status (re)gain in both origin and destination countries – by having his education recognised and used at its true value:

When something happens to our cars on our way back and it is an electrical problem, I can usually solve it on the spot so we can return home safe and sound. (...) Mr electrical engineer is how I was nicknamed...

Opportunity-driven entrepreneurs

While some of the participants were ‘pushed’ onto entrepreneurship trajectories due to issues related to the origin and destination country contexts, other returnees seemed, instead, to be ‘pulled’ into entrepreneurship. In other words, opportunity recognition refers to how individuals use cognitive frameworks to ‘connect the dots’ in a changing environment (Baron 2006). About one third of the participants in this study maintained that they became transnational entrepreneurs dealing in used cars when they recognised the potential market opportunities of this trade. Several individuals in this category seemed to be ‘pulled’ by factors in the origin or the destination country.

Having migration experience is one of the most important ‘pull’ factors mentioned in a variety of forms during the interviews. Darius, a returned migrant from Spain, offers an interesting example. He was aware that investing in a house and a basic infrastructure in the home village was only the first stage to which migrants aspired and where they tried to reproduce the same standard of living as the one they experienced abroad. However, most migrants have moved on from these initial ‘development’ forms and started to ‘invest’ their money in other ‘assets’, such as cars. He explains that his own migration experience gave him the possibility to identify this increasing need for used vehicles which he then transformed into a business opportunity:

Investing in houses was no longer seen as being enough for the following generations of migrants accustomed to the ‘Western’ standards of living. (...) I was in constant contact with the migrants and their families (...) and [could observe] the subsequent increasing investments in personal vehicles, not only in houses.

Alpár is another entrepreneur who was ‘pulled’ towards entrepreneurship by his migration experience. He used his former experience of working in Germany in a technical inspection centre to seize the opportunity to import used cars back in Romania after observing that this trade was growing in Poland:

Polish people were a constant presence [at the inspection centre] to get the technical inspection for their cars which was necessary to obtain the matriculation plates for export. (...) I thought that sooner or later Romanians would also start to do the same – which was later confirmed by more and more relatives asking for my help [to import used cars].

Even though he started his firm in the same industry in which he worked before, not all the returnees involved in this trade had experience in related fields. An example of opportunity-driven entrepreneurs importing used automobiles in Romania – but who did not specifically work in a related field while abroad – is Bogdan, whose business operates in both Germany and Romania. Bogdan, who was 28 years old when he was interviewed, was himself raised in a family already involved in the trade in used cars and he considers that, because of this context, he was also capable of chasing the business opportunities provided by this trade. Bogdan has experience of several years working abroad, especially in the agriculture sector, which he left in order to start this trade in importing used cars. While his family was involved in buying and reselling local (not imported) used cars, he used his experience abroad to establish a transnational business with used cars imported from abroad:

I saw that my family was not able anymore to compete with those businesses bringing cars from abroad. (...) I knew the language, the places to find the used cars and anything one needed to import them.

Going beyond the opportunity–necessity dichotomy

As briefly discussed in the first part, the existing literature tends to treat entrepreneurs’ motivation as being fixed. However, this categorisation overlooks the dynamic nature of entrepreneurial motivations as they appear in this research, which shows that entrepreneurial motivations among used-car traders can change over time. One such example is related to previous business experience. As several participants in this research specify, the trade in used vehicles can also have its roots in their previous entrepreneurial activities and experiences, some of which appear to be associated with the necessity-driven category. For instance, Călin opened a car repair shop in France in 2010. Before this he was, for a long time, in a difficult economic situation during which he only had short-term informal jobs in the context of the economic crisis and remained unemployed for almost two years. As a reaction to this prolonged negative work experience in the host country he decided, together with his wife, to revitalise a car repair shop based on a previous business owned by his wife’s family. According to him,

The economic hardships we encountered during the financial crisis in 2008 influenced my decision to reopen my wife’s family’s car repair shop (...) employment opportunities in France were limited – there were massive layoffs.

After more than eight years of business experience in France, they decided to channel their business energy towards the country of origin, Romania. Călin further explains his path to this form of entrepreneurship and how he diversified his business both in order to capitalise on perceived new business opportunities and also to reduce the risk of bankruptcy of their business in France.

The declining number of clients made us decide, in addition to the initial business activity (car painting in France), to start a secondary activity in Romania. (...) We had several clients who also exported used cars and it seemed that, in their field, things were working better than in ours...

As in the previous example, one oft-mentioned reason given by the interviewees is that their business establishment was the result of a lack of (satisfying) financial outcomes with their previous businesses. In this vein, the traders argue that switching to becoming entrepreneurs importing cars was not something to which they aspired but, rather, was a form of adjustment to the local economy which ‘pushed’ them along this specific entrepreneurship path.

However, this was not the only possible reason, as the example of Marian (a returnee from the UK) shows. He had a transportation company to the UK which was negatively impacted by the declining number of people travelling by bus to the UK after the introduction of low-cost airlines connecting the main cities in these two countries. Even though he could survive for a while transporting (fewer) people and more parcels, he was ‘forced’ to switch the business to the importation of used cars, as mentioned during the interview:

It was impossible to outwit the low-cost air companies which have four–five departures every day from here [name of airport] and another two–three from there [name of another nearby airport]. (...) They can be in the UK in three hours at half of the price of a bus ticket or even less...

As he continues explaining in the interview, in the first phase he had to switch the business from one mainly transporting people to one mainly delivering parcels. In addition, he also tried to identify possible clients in the Republics of Moldova and Ukraine. However, more and more clients were requesting that he also transport right-hand-drive vehicles from the UK to Romania, Moldova or Ukraine; he had fewer requests from migrants and their families to deliver gifts and other goods. Considering this, he also had to adjust his company to this increasing demand by buying car trailers and employing people with professional driving licences to be able to carry more than one car at once.

As the above examples show, changes in both the destination- and origin-country economic contexts can push entrepreneurs from other types of economic activities to the trade in used cars. However, these changes are impacting not only on the individuals who were initially ‘pushed’ to switching to the trade in used cars, as seen in the earlier examples but also on the individuals who were ‘pulled’ towards the entrepreneurial path. One such example is Adi (a return migrant from Germany), who had a shop in Osertown selling imported consumer goods from Germany. He explains how he and his brothers initially used the gap between the increasing needs of the local population in Romania for goods to which they had become accustomed while living abroad or when they were sent by other family members living abroad. However, as he clarifies, they soon realised that there was an increasing demand for used cars in Romania and they started first by selling their minivans in which goods were imported from abroad:

One day one of the clients asked if the vans in front of the shop were for sale. (...) He saw the [temporary] red matriculation plates and thought that the vans were imported to be resold. (...) I answered that we didn’t want to sell them because we used them to bring goods from abroad (...) later we discussed keeping only one van and selling the other in order to increase our income.

In addition to the above-mentioned reason of seeking a higher income, the entrepreneurs in this category also mentioned the idea of switching to the used-car trade so that they could return home, also citing their emotional attachment to the homeland, the lower costs of running their business or seeking a less-complex business

endeavour. For example, Bencze underlined in his interview that, after more than a decade of working and conducting business in the agricultural sector in Belgium, he felt he was too far away from his family and needed to be closer to his country and his people:

I was almost 40 years old and the moment to be closer to my country and my people had arrived but also to start my own family. So, I decided to orient my business endeavours towards Romania too. The trade in used cars allowed me to share some time living in both Belgium and Romania (...) and the idea was to move back to Romania after strengthening the business.

For some of the participants, their decision to enter the used-vehicles trade was closely linked with a thorough cost analysis. Thus, switching to this specific entrepreneurial activity conducted across borders is a way to reduce the associated financial costs. Several interviewees explained that their business establishment abroad was partly due to the foreseen lower costs of conducting this type of trade. As an illustrative example, Tudor explains how he decided to enter the market of imported vehicles soon after 2007 when Romania became part of the EU; for several years, the importation–exportation procedures were not clear and those running this kind of business could avoid paying VAT which was around 20 per cent of the price of the car and was an important part of the economic calculation. In other words, his transnational investment decisions were based on the logic of exploiting the differences between Romania and other EU countries from where Tudor (a returnee from Italy) imported used vehicles.

I started with an agriculture company dealing with the importation of used and new agricultural tools and machinery (...) this sector was growing nicely but the automotive sector was increasing even more. (...) I moved some of my business efforts to the auto sector when realising that, for so-called personal vehicles, nobody paid VAT or other import taxes.

Pavel (a return migrant from France) also offers an interesting example of why some entrepreneurs switched to the importation of used vehicles in Romania – in his case due to the less-complex nature of the business environment. Pavel has a company transporting people and parcels from Romania to France and back. As mentioned during the interview, he started to search on the French car market for available offers and almost completely switched to the trade in imported used cars because he found it less sophisticated – even though the income remained relatively the same. In his words,

People transportation and delivering parcels across countries was an increasingly complex business (...) one needed more and more insurances (...) technical certificates for the drivers and for the vehicles (...) health records (...) psychological tests (...). For the cars the process is less formal (...) one gets in the car and just drives from France to Romania.

Intertwining trajectories

Another important way in which the scholarship overlooks the dynamic nature of business motivation is that it usually assumes that an entrepreneurship trajectory excludes other possible occupational trajectories. However, what this research shows is that entrepreneurs can have both viable businesses in used cars and a full-time job. Thus, discussing the reasons why people entered the transnational trade in second-hand vehicles seems to be strongly related to the jobs they had when starting it, as well as to their previous migration experience. For instance, Lucas is a former migrant in Denmark who works as a police officer in Romania. He

has a work schedule which requires 24 hours on duty followed by 48 or 72 hours off duty. He sometimes uses this time off to fly to Denmark and drive back to Romania, usually two or three times per month. When asked about the reasons why he started the trade in used cars, Lucas mentioned that he has tried several other entrepreneurial activities or employment but the trade in used cars was offering a good mix of autonomy, being in touch with his former destination country and the additional income he needed at that moment:

I tried working as a gym instructor (...) had an agricultural investment producing walnut oil (...) was a salesperson for [name of a company producing sports food] (...) was ridesharing for [name of a company] (...) it kept me too busy and couldn't see my nephews growing up [in Denmark]...

Family traditions

In addition to the above reasons for starting to trade in used cars, this decision seems to be shaped by other variables such as family traditions and socio-demographic traits. Among the traders in used cars, one cluster consists of migrants from entrepreneurial families who went abroad to pursue their studies or/and to seek employment and gain experience in various sectors. Upon completion of their studies or work experience abroad, they returned to Romania and entered the trade in used vehicles by taking over pre-existing family-owned businesses. Therefore, these entrepreneurs did not establish a new firm *per se* but, rather, continued running the already established family companies dealing with importation of used cars.

This group of people, referred to here as second-generation entrepreneurs, explained how, while living abroad, they always had in mind to continue their family tradition. During one of these interviews, the entrepreneur mentioned that his family expected him to return to their home country after the completion of his studies and take care of his parents' business. As a member of a family with an almost decade-long tradition in the used-car trade, Dumitru knew that he would take over the family company after finishing his studies in Norway in 2016 and returning to Romania. The family intention to pass the business on to their son was constantly reiterated both before and during his stay in Norway. One of the ways in which his family restated their plan was to ask their son to search for used cars in Norway which could be exported back to Romania:

My parents knew that car prices are very high in Norway but they still asked me to check out the market prospects and find possible deals. (...) I worked for a few months in Oslo after finishing my Master's (...) the temptation to return home was too strong. I have more autonomy now and my parents' full support. (...) I can travel, visit the world, and live la vida bella.

However, there were different perspectives among the entrepreneurs regarding their children's involvement in the trade in used cars. While those traders with male children tend to mention the latter's (future) involvement in the trade, none of the participants having female children mentioned it. In a similar manner, the salient role of gender can be observed in the case of entrepreneurs who have both female and male offspring but who consider only the males as possible successors of their businesses. Although based on a small subsample of six interviewees, these findings suggest that their parents do not see the trade in used cars as being suitable for females. For instance, Stelian (a returnee from the Netherlands) accepts that at least one of his daughters will most probably pursue an entrepreneurial career, just like his son, although he would prefer to see her working or conducting business in fields considered more suitable for them, such as care work.

This is a very harsh trade (...) driving thousands of kilometres every week (...) a lot of crooks trying to sell you wrecks (...) good orientation skills are essential (...) only men work in the field (...) it is for the best if we work in the fields where we are surrounded by other people like us.

Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to unfold the motivations behind return migrants' involvement in business activities in Romania. Whilst the existing literature offers a detailed exploration of why returnees enter self-employment in general, we know relatively little about those returnees who start transnational businesses and how it compares to other kinds of entrepreneurial venture. By looking at the entrepreneurial motivations among Romanian transnational entrepreneurs involved in the trade in used vehicles, who operate across country borders, this research tries to fill this gap in studies of the migration–entrepreneurship nexus.

This article uses a typology which reveals the individual's motivation to enter entrepreneurship by distinguishing between necessity-driven, opportunity-motivated and mixed-motivations entrepreneurs and their reasoning behind each of these typologies – which can improve our understanding of why and in what context returnee transnational entrepreneurs start to build their careers.

As do other studies dealing with the topic of entrepreneurship among migrants (Barjaba 2018; Bloh *et al.* 2020), this paper highlights that necessity-driven entrepreneurs tend to establish a business venture with used automobiles imported to Romania after their return usually as a way to escape the various difficulties encountered in the origin and/or destination countries. However, the article draws a comparison with the existing scholarship by explicitly showing that difficulties in both origin and destination countries can play a significant role for return migrants starting up a transnational business. In this vein, for some of the participants, becoming entrepreneurs was not something to which they aspired but, rather, was a form of self-defence against the harsh contexts in both the origin and destination countries which 'pushed' them onto the entrepreneurship path. Lacking the requisite networks and not adapting to the local job market are among the most important difficulties mentioned by the participants – factors also reported in the existing scholarship (Knowlton 2006; Wassink and Hagan 2020). However, what this research also shows is that there is a constant interplay between these factors and that entrepreneurs have to consider factors in multiple locations when entering the used-car business.

While some entrepreneurs were 'pushed' onto entrepreneurship trajectories due to issues related to the origin- and destination-country contexts, other returnees seemed rather to be 'pulled' into entrepreneurship. In other words, like other studies on migrants' entrepreneurship (Bloh *et al.* 2020; Croitoru 2020), in this study several returnees maintained that they began their transnational entrepreneurship with used cars on recognising the potential market opportunities of this trade. However, it is important to note that the results contrast with the existing scholarship on returnee transnational entrepreneurship which usually highlights market opportunities related to the home-/residence-country context.

Another important result of this research is that the framework used, which reveals why migrants initiate businesses, can be also applied to the case of return migrants involved in other transnational businesses. What this article highlights, in addition, is that the entrepreneurial motivations of used-car traders are not fixed but, rather, can and do change over time. For instance, several individuals in this research have shown that the trade in used cars can have its roots in previous entrepreneurial activities and experiences which can be both necessity- and opportunity-driven. These findings contrast with other studies covering the return migration–entrepreneurship nexus which do not consider the changing dynamics over time (Cain and Spoonly 2013; Wang 2020), a situation which seems to occur regularly for used-car traders.

This study has a number of limitations which indicate the need for future research. One important limitation is that it focuses on entrepreneurs from one country – Romania. As argued by several scholars (Dabić, Vlačić,

Paul, Dana, Sahasranamam and Glinka 2020; Portes, Guarnizo and Haller 2002), migrants from different national or ethnic groups tend to develop distinct forms of entrepreneurship with varying degrees of success and comparison between the different groups of migrants can yield important additional knowledge. In a similar fashion, looking only at the second-hand-car traders reveals potentially very specific forms of motivation which cannot necessarily be extended to other returnee entrepreneurs. In addition, as in most research on returnees and returnee entrepreneurship, this works only with those who decided to return to the origin country and not with migrants who remained in the destination country or onward-migrated to other destinations (Wassink and Hagan 2020). Along these lines, further comparative research is needed with returnees involved in other types of business than the second-hand-car trade or coming from other origin countries or with entrepreneurs who still live in the destination country.

Notes

1. Samsar is defined in the Dictionary of Romanian Language as ‘a person who mediates sale–purchase businesses; person who makes everything a business object’.
2. All the names in this research are pseudonyms.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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The Impact of Parents' Work Migration on the Social, Communication and Educational Experiences of Left-Behind Adolescents

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Parental work migration can pose important risks for adolescents, such as joining inappropriate peer-groups, poor results in education or school drop-out. It can also facilitate positive changes in young people's behaviour, as many become aware of the sacrifices their parents make to provide them with a better lifestyle and education and behave responsibly in return. Given that the literature highlights both negative and positive transformations related to parents' migration, our aim is to address the impact of migration on adolescents left behind in rural Romania from their own perspective. We focus on teenagers' experiences of separation from their mother, father or both, in different situations (family life, communication and relationships, caring and concern for others, school achievements, future migration plans). Young people's agency – their capacity to self-educate and organise themselves to perform well at school and in everyday activities following parental migration – is less studied in Romania. Thus, in addition to making the reality of these adolescents better known, our approach provides information that can be turned into policy solutions aimed at improving their life quality.

Keywords: *parental work migration, school performance, learning agency, new communication technologies, Romanian migrants, transnational families*

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Introduction

In recent years, the migration of temporary labour, whether skilled or unskilled, has led to one of the most dramatic population shifts in Eastern Europe. Countries such as Romania, Ukraine and Poland have some of the largest migrant populations in the region (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021) and the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict seems to further deepen existing migration trends and flows. Our paper focuses on the Romanian diaspora, which exploded after 2014 when the borders of the EU countries' labour markets were opened for the Romanian labour force (Beciu, Ciocea, Mădroane and Cârlan 2018) and explores the consequences of parental migration on adolescents left at home.

One of the major consequences of the massive out-migration of Romanians is that a significant percentage of children have grown up without the irreplaceable support of their parents (Iancu 2013; Onu, Pop, Chiriacescu, Preda and Roman 2019). According to official statistics, the total number of children whose parents work abroad is estimated at between tens of thousands (National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption 2021) and hundreds of thousands (Save the Children Romania 2020; Toth, Toth, Voicu and Ștefănescu 2007). Many of them come from families where both parents are away or where the sole breadwinner is away. They are often left in the care of relatives (grandparents, uncles, aunts) or a guardian (foster carer, neighbour), but there are also cases where they are left on their own or placed in foster care (National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption 2019; Tomșa 2011). The vast majority of these children live in regions with high unemployment rates, especially in the north-east and south-west of the country and most come from rural areas (Bălțeanu et al. 2018).

Based on these realities and hypothesising that work migration inevitably leads to multiple changes that affect families' lifestyle, life quality, communication, relationships, etc., our study discusses some of the main transformations generated by parental migration from the adolescents' own standpoint. This perspective is less common in the Romanian academic literature, which tends to devote more attention to migrant narratives than to the perceptions and experiences of the children left behind. Our main focus is on the relationship between the 'missing' parent(s) and the adolescent and on how this personal, intimate relationship is reshaped by physical distance, new communication technologies and all the new realities that the teenager often has to confront alone. In line with prior studies (Kay and Trevena 2018; Safta, Stan, Iurea and Suditu 2014; Sharma, Devkota and Acharya 2021) and considering the long-term changes in its structure, dynamics and functionality, we argue that the family is the first institution affected by labour migration. Adolescents who are in a situation where one or both of their parents work(s) abroad remain, however, the most vulnerable category in the whole process and their cases should be carefully documented for a deeper understanding of this life-changing experience and of how the negative consequences emerging from it could be limited in the future.

We begin by providing contextual information on the migration phenomenon in Romania. Second, we elaborate on the implications that the parents' decision to work abroad has on their offspring left at home in terms of communication, relationships and school performance. We then present the methodology and discuss the empirical findings. Beyond results that validate or reinforce what we already know from other studies, we emphasise a key finding on how parental migration appears to shape adolescents' aspirations for their future career and migration plans. Next, we emphasise the gender dimension (in terms of both the parent(s) who migrated – mother, father or both – and the gender of the child left behind) and the resulting particularities. We also show how constant communication between transnational family members, facilitated by new technologies and devices, helps teenagers maintain or even improve their school performance after parental migration. Finally, we draw conclusions and offer some evidence-based recommendations for policy-makers.

Migration in Romania: an overview

In Romania, transnational migration expanded considerably after the country's accession to the EU in 2007 and became a consolidated trend in the years that followed. Migration is a major cause of demographic decline, contributing decisively to Romania's population decrease in the last decade (National Institute of Statistics 2020). With the opportunities offered by the labour market in Western Europe, migration has become an attractive solution for many Romanians, whether skilled or unskilled. Those who leave are both employable and subject to high potential fertility (Bălţeanu, Moldoveanu, Ichim and Dobrescu 2018).

Recent data from the Statistical Office of the European Commission (2021) show that more than 20 per cent of Romanian working people aged 20–64 live in different EU countries. In most cases, the decision to migrate (especially to Western Europe) was mainly driven by political, economic and social reasons. Research shows that the majority of Romanians are disappointed with the political system in Romania, corruption in the business sector and poor conditions in the healthcare system (Gherghina, Plopeanu and Necula 2020; Iancu 2013). The lack of jobs and of opportunities for advancement, the low wages compared to the workload or to an individual's own specialisation make up another set of grievances that contribute to Romanians' decision to emigrate (Save the Children Romania 2020; Tomşa 2011). Besides these *push* factors, there are also *pull* factors, which include policies and institutional models put in place in the host country and which add to the reasons why people choose a particular country – e.g., the living environment, better working conditions, financial security, development opportunities (Bălan and Olteanu 2017; Goschin, Roman and Danciu 2013). Thus, whether they have a better or a poorer material condition, come from rural or urban areas and have secondary or higher education, Romanians express similar motivations for leaving the country (National Institute of Statistics 2020). However, much remains to be understood about how the left-behind children perceive these motivations, relate to them and feel they are affected by them – this is one of the main issues that our research addresses (RQ1). Beyond the reasons why people leave, the literature documents both the advantages and the disadvantages of migration, presenting positive prospects – e.g., cooperation, development through remittances, diversity, tolerance, economic growth and mobility (Gherghina *et al.* 2020; Mădroane 2015; Sandu 2016) – alongside negative effects such as racism, discrimination, social marginalisation, poverty and human trafficking (Pascoal and Schwartz 2018; Tomşa and Jenaro 2015). The benefits of migration include lower unemployment, improved interstate relations, a better quality of life for both the migrant and their family, a change in worldview and greater self-confidence (Iancu 2013; Pirwitz 2019; Toth *et al.* 2007). Among the challenges, the most important are economic and social, such as the exodus of high-skilled people, labour shortages, population decline, family separation, trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labour (Docquier and Rapoport 2012; Moroşanu, Bulat, Mazzilli and King 2019). Of the many problems that can be triggered by parents' migration, this paper will explore two main dimensions: how the left-behind adolescents develop and reshape their interaction and relationships with others (RQ2); and how parental migration affects adolescents' school experiences and their subsequent migration plans (RQ3). None of these issues have been addressed recently in the Romanian academic literature, which lacks up-to-date qualitative studies highlighting adolescents' experiences and perceptions of their parents' work migration.

Literature review

Transnational families and ties: communication and relationships after parents' migration

Parents' decision to work abroad is driven by the desire to improve the family's economic situation and to give their children more opportunities to study and create a better future (Sime 2018). However, once the decision

to emigrate is taken (usually at the family level, in consultation with others – see Abrego 2014; Safta *et al.* 2014), and a member leaves to work abroad, there are a number of challenges and drawbacks to the family dynamics.

Emigration data published by the National Institute of Statistics (2020) show that, during 2019, Romanian men emigrated in slightly greater numbers (54.3 per cent) than women (45.7 per cent of total emigration). In most such cases, the mothers take over the responsibilities of both parents (Munteanu and Tudor 2007). However, there are many situations where it is the mother who leaves and her absence is generally shown to be more distressing for the children than that of the father (Abrego 2014; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). This is due not only to the special attachment that children feel towards their mothers but also to the fact that fathers often seem unable to take over all of the mother's responsibilities (Sharma *et al.* 2021).

When both parents decide to work abroad, the children usually stay with their grandparents, who take over the parents' responsibilities. When leaving children with their grandparents is not an option, they are left in the care of more-distant relatives or with older siblings who are only occasionally supervised by an adult. In other cases, children are left alone or placed in foster care (National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption 2019).

These situations can cause numerous problems on a personal and social level in communicating with and relating to others, both close – parents, relatives and friends – and more-distant, such as neighbours, schoolfriends and teachers. The intensity of these problems depends largely on how well-established the relationships between family members were prior to separation, as well as on the relationships which adolescents build with their carers (Jingzhong and Lu 2011). After the migration episode, these relationships may either suffer a level of degradation or, instead, may strengthen. Depending on how strong the relationships between parents and children remain or become after migration, the relationships that those children left at home build with close and distant others are also influenced (Boroşanu and David-Rus 2019; Tomşa and Jenaro 2015; Valtolina and Colombo 2012). Apparently, being motherlessness has a stronger effect than being fatherlessness on teenagers – especially girls, who become more isolated from others and tend to have a harder time communicating with friends, peers and teachers at school (Abrego 2014). However, in some situations the father manages to restore a balance after the mother's departure by cultivating an open relationship with the children. When both parents are away, poor communication makes children feel lonely, abandoned, unmotivated and disoriented. Thus, between parents who left and children who stayed, an open relationship based on understanding and support for the difficulties the latter face at this age, as well as control over their school performance, are essential for their development.

Research shows that the evolution of technology and the rapid access to the internet play a particularly important role in maintaining and strengthening relationships between contemporary transnational family members. Alinejad (2021) illustrates how social media networks facilitate communication between Romanian migrants and left-behind family, shaping relations of 'long-distance emotional care'. Through video calls or real-time photo-sharing, media platforms succeed in transforming transnational care into a mediated emotional experience, where 'care is not merely transferred but felt through mediation' (2021: 444). Social platforms are part of the daily routine of transnational family members and play an essential part in conveying emotional intimacy (Acerdera, Yeoh and Asis 2018; Nedelcu 2017). Thus, very often, transnational family relationships in the digital age are described in terms of 'digital kinning' (Baldassar and Wilding 2020) and 'careful co-presence' (Alinejad 2019), where 'doing family' digitally includes maintaining the social roles (mother's role, father's role) imposed by societal norms.

We argue that, despite geographical distance and the rare occasions when members of a transnational family are physically reunited, *open, constant* and *in-depth communication* between migrant(s) and the left-behind can be truly effective in keeping family ties and relationships alive. In this respect, new technologies and

communication devices bring family members ‘together’ at the end of almost every day. Being in the same virtual room with loved ones, talking about the day’s little events, seeing their reactions and deciphering their body language in real time is no small feat when the family has to live separately.

Parents’ work migration and children’s school experience

Adolescents whose parents migrated to work show several types of behaviour in terms of school performance, so it is hard to find a common point on this specific topic. Sometimes, their learning outcomes improve as they become more aware of the role of education in their personal and professional development. Children take their studies seriously (despite their parents not being there to constantly supervise them) because they value the contribution that education makes to building quality interpersonal relationships (Fiore 2022). Some teenagers are aware of the sacrifices which their parents make to provide them with a better lifestyle and education, so they reciprocate with good educational results. This ability of adolescents to self-educate and organise themselves in order to achieve satisfactory educational outcomes is defined in the literature as young people’s learning agency. Agency is the expression of a person’s power over their environment, their actions/decisions related to their own existential journey. Learning agency refers to the ability of people to exhibit a higher level of academic investment, motivation, involvement and participation, leading to more-positive educational experiences and achievements (Margolius, Doyle, Hynes, Flanagan and Jones 2021).

Other studies show that family breakdown due to migration can make children feel abandoned, leading to their disinterest in learning (Tomşa and Jenaro 2015; Toth *et al.* 2007). There are also studies that report aggression or irritability in adolescents from families separated by migration processes, who became more apathetic and reluctant to interact with their peers or to actively participate in class (Antman 2012; Fiore 2022). Hence, following the emigration of one or both parents, teenagers may adopt deviant behaviours that could negatively affect their learning outcomes.

School results are also influenced by the multiple responsibilities which children take on after their parents’ migration (Jin, Chen, Sun and Liu 2020; Munteanu and Tudor 2007; Save the Children Romania 2020). In cases where younger siblings remain in the care of older ones (occasionally supervised by an adult), the latter assume the role of parents to the former. Beyond household chores that include cooking, cleaning and shopping, older siblings make sure the younger ones go to school, help them to prepare their homework and even attend parent–teacher meetings. Very often, the fact that caring for younger siblings remains their responsibility makes them more concerned with perfecting this new role than with their own social development or education (Amuedo-Dorantes, Georges and Pozo 2010). Moreover, some feel that fulfilling these tasks is more of a duty to their parents; thus, in addition to education, they are deprived of play or rest.

With all this in mind, we argue that, when children truly understand (the need for) and support parental migration, they will be more responsible and act more maturely when departure occurs. This means, among other things, taking their studies seriously, maintaining/improving their academic performance and planning their career carefully. When children are not consulted or are left completely out of discussions and decisions preparing the departure of one/both parents (either because they are too young or because relations between family members are not close, etc.), they will tend to feel disoriented and confused, which will most probably lead to them neglecting school, getting poor grades, skipping classes, etc. Once again, we believe that true *communication* between family members, both before and, particularly, after parental migration, can limit the negative impact of the latter, especially on children’s education and their relationship with school.

Methodology

To understand adolescents' perceptions of both the benefits and risks of belonging to a transnational family, we conducted in-depth interviews with 21 adolescents aged 16–18 years from rural Oltenia, a region in south-western Romania that ranks second in statistics on the places of origin of left-behind children. The interviews were designed as informal semi-structured conversations and, given the Covid-19 pandemic, were conducted via Zoom between March 2021 and April 2022. They included open-ended questions on a variety of topics, from everyday life and its challenges, to specific issues derived from the research objectives. Life stories, opinions and personal accounts were encouraged as we were interested to learn as much as possible about the unique reality of these adolescents, as perceived by them and described in their own words.

There were three main research questions that guided this study:

RQ1: What are adolescents' perceptions of the reasons behind their parents' decision to migrate?

RQ2: How do adolescents communicate and maintain relationships with other people, both in their close and their distant circle, following the parental migration?

RQ3: What are teenagers' perceptions of the effects of parental migration on their school experience and outcomes?

The first question was designed to capture how adolescents relate to their parents' decision to migrate for work (whether or not they were consulted/told why this decision was taken, whether they understand and support it or, rather, question or oppose it). We focused on adolescents' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages arising from this decision, as well as the new responsibilities and tasks which they had to take on. The second question aimed to capture how these young people connected and developed relationships with those around them, both family members or people less close to them. We paid attention to the role of technology in this process and explored the extent to which the use of different devices and platforms succeeded in bridging the gap between those who left and those who stayed. The final question addressed adolescents' educational experiences as they perceive them. We asked them about peers and teachers, favourite subjects and best school achievements, challenges and problems. We also asked them about their future career plans and their intentions to migrate.

The selection of the participants was conditioned by several criteria: belonging to a transnational family with at least one parent working abroad (temporarily or long-term), for at least five years; living in a rural area that tops the statistics on parental out-migration; being at least 16 years old (at that age, teenagers are better able to formulate detailed, coherent answers in line with their real situation). Suitable people for the research sample were identified in a village in the south of Oltenia, where almost every family has someone working abroad. We selected interviewees who subsequently recommended other relevant contacts, using the snowball technique. At the end of this process, we had interviewed 21 adolescents (10 boys and 11 girls) with one or both parents away. Written informed parental consent was obtained for all interviewees under the age of 18. Both parents and adolescents were informed of the purpose and objectives of the research and we insisted that their participation is voluntary and not incentivised in any way. They were also assured that their privacy and confidentiality would be respected, and their names changed to preserve anonymity.

As the topics we tried to uncover are quite sensitive, we paid particular attention to the wording of our questions. We also asked interviewees to tell us as much as they felt comfortable with, to stop at any time or to skip questions which they did not feel ready to answer. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes each, were audio-recorded and transcribed for accurate analysis and interpretation of the data. Field notes were maintained by the researchers to complement the recordings. After a detailed review of the transcriptions, an

interpretive content analysis followed. The main themes addressed in the interviews were organised into relevant categories (combining similar elements and maintaining a constant comparison of the data both within and between the participants) according to the directions/topics emerging from the research questions and objectives. The qualitative analysis of the data reflected the three major themes that are relevant to the present discussion and are detailed below.

Findings and discussion

Parents' decision to emigrate as seen by their adolescent offspring

Most of the existing research devoted to labour migration from Romania has focused on mechanisms, economic and demographic consequences or motives of this phenomenon, often from the migrants' standpoint. Our aim is to add a new perspective – that provided by the adolescents left at home – on the reasons that contribute to Romanians' decision to migrate. Our findings document two main reasons behind parental work migration as perceived by the teenagers: the precarious financial situation of the family and the lack of job opportunities in Romania:

(...) they left for financial reasons, because I had to pay rent during my high school years and they couldn't afford it. (Ruxandra, 16, f).

The reasons behind my father's departure are crystal clear for me... I understand them well. He tried to make a good decision for all of us, he sacrificed his life. (...) And he still wants what's best for us, that's why he's still there (Robert, 16, m).

Consistent with previous research (Abrego 2014; Munteanu and Tudor 2007), our results show that the decision to emigrate was generally made by all family members (adolescents were also consulted whenever possible) and was motivated in terms of a better life, often understood as free from financial worries. Most interviewees who were over 10 years old when their parents left reported that they understood and supported them in this process from the beginning. This was particularly the case if the father was the one who migrated and the child/children stayed with their mothers. Nevertheless, interviewees who were very young when their parents migrated said that, initially, they neither understood nor agreed with their parents' leaving but, as they grew older and their needs increased, the purpose of this arrangement became clearer:

When I was younger I used to suffer a lot and I was upset, but now I'm beginning to understand them. If I were in their shoes, I would certainly do the same (Radu, 18, m).

Based on our findings, we argue that the adolescents' age at the time of their parents' departure may be crucial for them to both understand the situation in depth and to better manage the difficulties arising from it. Whether the father, mother or both migrated is also of paramount importance for how teenagers cope with the new context. When both parents – and especially when mothers leave – to provide for their families, most interviewees find it hard to accept the situation, no matter how fully they seem to understand what motivates it:

I think she should have stayed with me at least until I finished secondary school... I think that would have made it easier for me to accept it. But as things were... her absence became pretty painful. I missed her warmth, I missed her altogether, and I think that made me want to take over as much of what she was doing at home as possible... I agreed to do everything she did so that she wouldn't be missed... (Ana-Maria, 18, f).

Even if most adolescents understood and approved their parents' decision, they described the new context in terms of both advantages and disadvantages. Interestingly, when asked about the main benefits of their parents' migration to work, many teenagers did not mention money primarily but tended to emphasise greater freedom and fewer constraints:

The biggest advantage was that I wasn't restricted in the ways some of my friends were (Adi, 18, m).

I could do what I wanted much more easily without having to ask for my mother's or father's permission (Denisa, 17, f).

This may have to do with the fact that, in adolescence, people value particularly the lack of adult control and the independence and freedom to make their own decisions (Boroşanu and David-Rus 2019). The financial situation, which improved significantly for all family members, was ranked second by most of the teenagers when describing the best parts of their parents' migration. They talked about schooling at renowned high schools, better education prospects, a higher standard of living, housing renovation:

The biggest advantage is that I was able to attend a better high school. This way, I can prepare myself for a career... Without her support, without the money she sent me, I wouldn't be able to pursue these things. If my mother hadn't left, we'd never be where we are now (Lili, 18, f).

Adolescents learn that they can manage quite well on their own and make their own plans and decisions. Among others, the household responsibilities that fall to teenagers after their parents migrate provide a perfect context for them to show agency, power, and involvement:

You learn that you can live without a parent, you can make it (...). I learned to cook my own food, wash my own clothes, clean the house... I've educated myself in a way... I learned to do more things on my own, to take care of myself and the house.... (Ciprian, 17, m).

In terms of downsides, the emotional cost of migration topped the young people's lists, and many reported feelings of loneliness and longing, a constant need for support and for the protective physical presence of the parents:

I can't deny the fact that I feel lonely (even though I live with my grandmother)... that I miss them, but I try not to be selfish (Ruxandra, 16, f).

I wish I could talk to her anytime, I wish I knew she was home... I'd like to have someone waiting for me when I come back from school... I miss everything when she's not there... (Adi, 18, m).

Very few interviewees said that, if they had been in their parents' shoes, before they thought of leaving the country, they would have done their best to find a better job in Romania. These responses came mainly from

teenagers who were very young when the family was separated (4–5 years old) or where the mother was the migrant parent; our findings providing support for what the literature suggests – that children whose mothers have emigrated suffer more from a lack of affection (Abrego 2014; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). In this context, we believe that the development of public policies that make it possible for adolescents to participate in psychological counselling services is essential for their development and well-being. In addition, finding mechanisms to involve them in discussion and support groups made up of people in the same situation as them can be useful in teaching adolescents that they are not alone and that there are many ways to cope.

With respect to the new responsibilities which the teenagers took on after their parents left, our results reflect two main categories of experience. For adolescents with both parents away, the new responsibilities are manifold and often overwhelming, especially when grandparents cannot deal with them alone:

When my grandmother fractured her hand and was hospitalised, I took over all the housework. I always felt tired, I felt like I couldn't do it all. My sister was younger and I had to take care of her schooling too, make sure she did her homework, help her with everything (Daniela, 16, f).

A similar situation was experienced by Ana-Maria who, although she was only 14 when her mother left, was also very involved in housework and caring for her older brothers for whom she cooked, washed clothes, etc. These findings are consistent with those of prior studies (Jin *et al.* 2020; Munteanu and Tudor 2007; Save the Children Romania 2020) which describe the multiple roles and tasks that left-behind adolescents take on, from household chores to parenting younger siblings. This affects their lives to a great extent as it ends up depriving the teenagers of rest and of the opportunity to attend to their priorities, such as studying, playing sports or simply spending more time with their friends. In the case of adolescents with one parent away, our results also align with extant studies showing that, when the mother stayed at home, she took over almost all of the father's parenting responsibilities. In this way, even if the adolescents helped out from time to time, they were more free to focus on their own interests and needs:

I didn't have much to do... basically most of the responsibilities were taken over by my mother and my sister, because she's older than me. (Laurențiu, 16, m).

However, if the stay-at-home parent was the father, the adolescents took on more of the household chores and learned to take care of themselves. Most learned to cook, wash and clean but were eventually glad to have learned to do so as they see it as personal development.

We conclude this section with some mentions of adolescents' choices about their future. Asked about their plans, with very few exceptions, interviewees said that they want to live, study and work in Romania and dream of the moment when their families will be reunited. This outcome may reflect a repressed difficulty in fully accepting and accommodating their parents' decision to work abroad, in the sense that, although rationally they seem to understand and support it to a great extent, emotionally the burden it has caused may be harder to overcome. Thus, teenagers may not want to carry on with this kind of life, where family and loved ones are always far away. As our results show, the hardships they went through in the long years when one or both parents worked abroad made them value ordinary activities, such as time with parents, close family ties, holidays spent together:

I want to finish high school, take my exams, continue my studies and make a life here. I wouldn't like to be away from my loved ones all the time. I see how it is for me and I wouldn't want it to be like that for my family when I have my own family (Denis, 17, m).

However, this reluctance to see themselves migrating for work may be also an effect of the messages they receive from their parents, both explicitly and implicitly. We believe that, with the remittances they send home, parents also ‘send’ the message that there is no more room for similar sacrifices in the family. In other words, the parents’ migration – the ultimate sacrifice for family welfare – would especially make sense if adolescents were not forced to follow in their footsteps. This idea should be tested in further studies.

Communicating and relating to others following parental emigration

Another key theme of our analysis concerns adolescents’ communication patterns and networks following parental migration. The focus is primarily on the interaction with the parent(s) who left, the devices used to communicate, the topics addressed, the perceived changes in family dynamics and the redefinition of relationships between family members. Particular attention is paid to how adolescents connected with and related to the people who cared for them in their parents’ absence (grandparents, relatives) as well as to other relevant people such as best friends, schoolmates and teachers.

We find that the changes occurring in young people’s lives after their parents’ departure are multi-layered and complex, ranging from the need to process an entirely new reality and their place in it to premature maturation, the assumption of responsibilities that normally belong to adults, difficulties in making decisions when they have no one to turn to for advice or guidance and the habit of being on their own from an early age. Life away from parents often brought with it feelings of insecurity and injustice; new situations that adolescents did not know how to react to also added to their doubts and anxieties.

The most affected were those adolescents who had both parents or the sole supporting parent abroad and who were visited about once a year. Those who were left behind at a very young age (during pre-school/primary-school years) and those who have their mothers away tend to perceive their parents as strangers or distant friends whom they discover more with every new encounter. In such cases, as other studies show (Toth *et al.* 2007), the relationship between the teenagers and their grandparents is redefined in the sense that the latter are perceived as parents, as the real caregivers and as the most important people in the world:

Unfortunately, not all children are lucky enough to have grandparents like mine, who are extraordinary people, from whom I had and always have something to learn (Maria, 18, f).

Teenagers who feel truly connected to their grandparents do whatever they can to help them, taking on roles and responsibilities to make their life easier:

After my parents left, my younger sister and I remained in the care of our grandmother, but I felt I had to get involved and support my grandmother, especially with regards to my sister. My only responsibility was to help my grandmother and sister to not miss our parents. I mean, I tried to give my sister more support and affection... so that she would miss our parents less (Daniela, 16, f).

In other cases, despite the close ties with their grandparents, teenagers push the limits and take advantage of a greater lack of control and boundaries on their part. While finding this approach advantageous and liberating at the time, adolescents have also understood that it caused them problems, particularly in terms of poor school performance. This result is in line with previous research showing that the physical absence of the parent decreases the likelihood of boundary enforcement and influence over children (Gonța 2007; Valtolina and Colombo 2012).

Some of the adolescents with both parents away talked about a constant need for validation, for connection and appreciation – ‘I strive to have people around me and I put a lot of effort and energy into having friends around me’ (Ionuț, 18, m). Most of the time they remain quiet in friendship groups, avoid sharing their thoughts and feelings for fear of being judged; some tend to spend most of their time isolated from the rest of the group. This manifestation is less visible in adolescents who have only one parent away, especially the father. On the other hand, those who have turned to others more confidently when they needed help and were supported by friends, neighbours, close relatives or teachers, are more open to communicating and investing in relationships with others:

My friends are my family. I always talk to them if I'm in a bad mood. I go and sleep over at my girlfriends, spend time with them and their parents... (Andreea, 17, f).

In terms of communication with the missing parent(s), our results align with current research (Acerdera *et al.* 2018; Alinejad 2021; Nedelcu 2017) showing that new technologies and platforms play a major role in reducing physical distance and bringing family members together, even if mainly on a screen or in a virtual room. As our interviewees say, they are one (phone) call away from their parents, and social networks like Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp are most helpful (also due to their accessibility and low cost) when it comes to getting in touch with each other. Laurențiu (16, m), for example, appreciated more the benefits of the new communication platforms and devices in his relationship with his migrant parent when he was told about how Gabi, his older sister, in the absence of smartphones and Internet access, communicated with her father through letters and photos taken on special occasions:

Connecting online and seeing each other through social media is very important. And the proof is in what my sister experienced when she was little and my dad was away. (...) I've seen touching letters and her dictating to my mum what to say to my dad... Mum would send dad printed pictures so he could see how Gabi [his sister] was growing up, what she had done on several occasions, what she had invented. They told me that when they talked on the phone they almost counted their words because it cost quite a lot. My sister used to tell me that she would get a shock when she saw my father face to face, and he was always amazed by how much she grew from one encounter to the next (Laurențiu, 16, m).

As useful and practical as it is, modern technology does not replace hugs or physical touch: ‘My mother tries very hard to make me not miss them too much, but internet chats are not the same as when I have them next to me. I mean, I want them to kiss me, hug me, comfort me, especially when I'm having a bad day’ (Andreea, 17, f). Some teenagers insisted that the absence of a parent or a relationship, small gestures, small routines (e.g., ‘decorating the Christmas tree with dad’), a genuine conversation or simple activities (e.g. going to the cinema, attending end-of-school-year celebrations together) cannot be substituted by unlimited access to the internet and modern applications. In this regard, they pointed out the superficiality of some of the conversations they have with their parents on WhatsApp or Messenger. These mostly boil down to banal discussions about whether and what they ate, how they slept, how school went (often without much detail):

I don't 'communicate' with my parents, but we talk, I write, they write back. Mummy tries to talk to me. I'm the problem, because I don't communicate. I don't talk to her often, I don't call her when I have something to say, I don't even ask her how she is, if she's well or not. And maybe I'll regret it because I care a lot about Mummy, but I don't show it to her. I don't know how to show it (Daiana, 18, f).

To sum up, despite being grateful that they can keep in touch with each other through technology, for many interviewees truly authentic communication occurs when their parents come home for the holidays. That is when the family gets together and everything is perfect, as teenagers say. However, they also conclude that, even when the parents are at home, after the first truly intense days together, things and discussions become diluted and routine and banal conversations emerge. For many interviewees, this seems another way of telling themselves that geographical distance is not the biggest obstacle to maintaining close family relationships. As can be seen from their responses, when there is constant, open and honest communication between family members, the negative effects of physical separation can be more easily mitigated.

The impact of parental migration on adolescents' school experience

On the whole, adolescents understand the sacrifices that parents make for the wellbeing of the family and their future in particular. Thus, they feel motivated to perform well at school, not only as a form of gratitude to their parents but also as the only chance to overcome their condition:

I study the same as before, I do my best to keep my grades up, to get a scholarship because I know that my parents left to give me a better future and I don't want to let them down (Ruxandra, 18, f).

This approach to education provides a context for young people to express high levels of (learning) agency and demonstrates a mature and healthy behaviour that is also reflected in previous studies (Boroşanu and David-Rus 2019, etc.) which show that, in some cases, teenagers' learning outcomes improve after their parents' migration, as the young people become more responsible. Relatedly, our results show that most adolescents who understand (the need for) and support parental migration decide to continue their studies or activities when this occurs. Most of them have medium- and long-term plans for future studies and career paths (notable exceptions are those who were very young when the families were separated and those whose mother is away and the father is quite cold and distant). A key aspect that our study documents is that daily communication and close contact between teenagers and their migrated parent(s) helps them all to stay anchored in a present which is not always easy to accept but which is seen as a necessary sacrifice for a brighter future. Constant and open communication between family members who are separated by migration is always a good bet, as it helps everyone to cope better with the new situations and challenges and has a positive impact on adolescents' academic performance and achievement.

Similarly, the relationship between parents and teachers (easily maintained with instant communication devices) can mediate adolescents' academic progress, leading them to take their educational responsibilities more seriously. The parents' involvement in their teenagers' schooling, even from a distance, appears to increase the academic engagement and outcomes. Positive effects on the school performance of adolescents can also be generated by a strong bond between teenagers and teachers, cultivated and maintained through open communication, constant support and encouragement from teachers and appropriate teacher behaviour that arouses students' admiration: 'The geography teacher is my favourite, because she is fair, even if she is quite demanding' (Daiana, 18, f). In this context, we can speak of a transfer of parental authority, with teachers becoming role models for their students. In the absence of parents to validate adolescents' academic achievements, teachers and mentors are often invested with the confidence that they can guide the teenagers' steps in the same way that their parents would: 'Especially now, during my last year of high school, I really needed someone to guide me and I can say that I have a teacher who is always by my side and to whom I am very grateful for her help' (Eli, 17, f). Emotional closeness to teachers, especially for those adolescents with absent mothers, can have a positive impact on the young people's confidence to develop personal discussions

on sensitive issues in search of viable solutions to them. Older siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles can also contribute substantially to the educational process, for similar reasons to those discussed above.

On a different note, some interviewees admitted that, following their parents' migration, their school results deteriorated. Explanations for this were varied. Some spoke of a lack of motivation to manage their time effectively or to learn. Accustomed to having their daily activities organised and carried out with other family members, teenagers felt disoriented and confused after their parents left. Consequently, school fell out of the sphere of their immediate priorities. Other blamed their poor learning performance on a lack of support from absent parents who managed to supervise their educational progress only when they were at home:

Maybe I would have gotten a higher GPA if they had stayed to help me when I had questions... My dad used to help me with my physics homework and my mum with French (Radu, 18, m).

Some students left the impression that they were always looking for excuses to hide their lack of motivation and low interest in educational performance, already visible before their parents left. For others, too much freedom has left school behind: 'I have a lot of freedom, no one controls me, and I can't figure out how to manage my time effectively to learn. I need someone to sit next to me, check up on me and ask me why I'm not studying' (Ionuț, 18, m). Other interviewees admitted that they skipped classes more often since their parents have been away: 'My school situation is neither good nor bad. Now, with online school, I've skipped some classes because I find it hard to get up... My mum would have probably woken me up earlier in the morning' (Ciprian, 17, m). In line with other studies (Boroșanu and David-Rus 2019; Tomșa and Jenaro 2015; Toth *et al.* 2007), our research illustrates that a lack of rules to follow often means acting without direction and constantly testing the ground to learn right from wrong. From this we can conclude that the role of the parent, both in education and in other areas, is fundamental and that self-discipline, in order to be properly cultivated, must be tested through experiences that impose safe limits.

Conclusion and limitations of the study

There is no doubt that, after their parents' labour migration, adolescents go through a life-changing experience. While there are upsides to this process that most people would not get from working in Romania, the emotional costs of separating teenagers from one or both of their parents are impossible to avoid or ever compensate for. In this paper, we did not seek to discuss parents' decision to migrate for work, nor did we try to suggest solutions for them to stop looking for jobs abroad. Given Romania's ongoing economic challenges, for many of these people who have spent years trying to find alternatives to migration, this would be illusory. Our goal was to get a deeper understanding of the reality of the left-behind adolescents, in order to be able to suggest ways that could limit the negative consequences emerging from it in the future.

The in-depth interviews we conducted in the pursuit of our objectives revealed many interesting findings, the most significant of which we summarise below. A first important take-away from this research is that, as they get older, teenagers are more likely to understand and cope with their parents' decision to migrate, appreciating the increased freedom and material benefits that facilitate a better life and improved educational opportunities for them. Another important finding is that parental migration appears to shape adolescents' own aspirations for future careers and migration plans. Exploring how teenagers see their future reveals their hopes of succeeding in Romania through education, which can offer better prospects than their parents had. These perspectives and the fact that most interviewees do not want to start a transnational family in the future may be due to the difficulties and challenges of living away from their own parents. A further key aspect highlights the very active transnational family life, where communication and close ties are maintained especially with

the help of new communication technologies and devices. Although modern technology does not replace physical contact, it does reduce physical distance and mediates long-distance emotional care. Finally, parental out-migration can also trigger positive outcomes for our participants, who tend to show a high level of learning agency and a mature and responsible attitude towards school. Taking their studies seriously means both a better career path and a chance to re-pay the sacrifices their parents made.

The adolescents left behind by migrant parents are a group that unfortunately will not disappear in the near future, so we argue that policy-makers should take this as a starting point when implementing measures to improve the teenagers' lifestyle and quality of life. Certainly, trying to keep parents at home by stimulating a competitive and rewarding labour market at the national level is a priority. Until then, however, the immediate reality is that, in Romania, there are tens or even hundreds of thousands of children who live daily without their parents and who must be helped, through relevant public policies, to cope more easily with this situation. First (and consistent with other scholars' recommendations – see Pascoal and Schwartz 2018; Safta *et al.* 2014; Tomşa and Jenaro 2015), we believe that parents who decide to work abroad should inform the local authorities of their intention and provide additional information about those in whose care the adolescents remain. Currently, parents are not obliged to declare their departure from the country for more than three months, which may have an impact on the correct collection of records of left-behind children, whose number in Romania varies greatly depending on the organisation collecting the data. For instance, while the most recent statistics released by the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption (2021) show that, in Romania, there are about 73,387 children left at home by their migrant parents, other studies (Save the Children Romania 2020) provide much higher and deeply concerning numbers (e.g. 300,000 or more). These statistical and policy gaps would likely not be so severe if there was a nationwide system for registering all children whose parents work abroad.

Second, we argue that the educational outcomes of children left behind by their migrant parents should remain a serious concern for both those around them (parents, carers, teachers, etc.) and the state. Although, as our research shows, some adolescents may not fully understand the role of school in their lives, the parents are too far away to exercise authority and the caregivers are too old or too busy with the day-to-day care of these adolescents, we argue that the state has a duty to fund programmes that foster academic interest and achievement. These may include training programmes for teachers to improve their skills to support left-behind children as well as financial/other incentives for teachers who are willing to work overtime to help the adolescents to avoid falling behind and dropping out after parental migration. Third, in line with previous research (Onu *et al.* 2019), we argue that the state should adequately fund social assistance services that design and implement measures aimed at improving adolescents' emotional wellbeing and quality of life.

Like any other qualitative paper, ours also comes with limitations. Among the most important, the small sample size does not really allow for a comparative analysis of the gender data together with a comparative and more in-depth analysis of situations where the interviewee has only one parent working abroad, both parents away or the sole supporting parent away. Depending on these cases (which we addressed somewhat tangentially when presenting the data), we could have brought more nuance to the discussion of the impact of parental migration on adolescents left behind. Another important aspect concerns the fact that most of this research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, which made face-to-face interviews impossible. Hence, poor internet connections and other technical issues (e.g., background noise and distractions) may, in some cases, have affected the flow of the discussions and the accuracy of the answers provided via Zoom. The limited number of interviews does not allow us to present an overall picture of migration and its impact through the eyes of the teenagers left at home in rural Romania. Also, the adolescents' responses are self-reported data, reflecting their perceptions at a particular time, in a particular context.

Further research on the topic is definitely needed. In addition to the limitations mentioned above, we believe that future studies should take into account, in both qualitative and quantitative surveys, the length of time that the children and their parents were separated (in our case it ranged from 4 to 14 years), the age of the children when this occurred, the relationship which the child builds with those in whose care he/she has remained, as well as with teachers and peers at school, whether and when parents intend to come back and whether and why children (do not) consider joining them abroad. All these variables, examined from the perspective of all the actors involved, would contribute to better understanding the challenges faced by young people in transnational families and to finding more effective ways of alleviating them.

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Mobility and Connection to Places: Memories and Feelings about Places that Matter for CEE-Born Young People Living in Sweden

Oksana Shmulyar Gréen*, Charlotte Melander*, Ingrid Höjer*

This article addresses issues of mobility and place-making among CEE-born young people who migrated from Poland and Romania to Sweden as children (up to the age of 18). Previous research on intra-EU mobility in other destinations posits this group as 1.5-generation migrants who, due to their mobility at a formative age, experience duality and in-betweenness – with specific effects on their social and familial lives. Inspired by this research, our article examines how mobility to Sweden at a young age (re)shapes young peoples' connection to and meaning-making of places post-migration. Drawing on two-step qualitative interviews with 18 adolescents and young adults from Poland and Romania, as well as on drawings and photographs as part of the visual materials produced by the participants, the article makes two contributions. First, it integrates the scholarship on children and youth mobility, translocalism and place-making but also deepens these conceptualisations by underlining the role of memories and feelings in young people's place-making processes. Second, the article suggests that visual methodology is a valuable tool with which to capture the embodied and the material practices of translocal place-making over time. Our findings reveal that most of these young people continue to strongly associate with places from their childhood and country of origin. For some, these places symbolise ongoing transnational practices of visits and daily communication while, for others, these are imaginary places of safety and a right place to be. The findings also highlight the importance of memories and feelings in creating transnational connectivity between the countries of origin and Sweden, as well as in developing coping strategies against the social exclusion and misrecognition which some young people may experience in their new living spaces.

Keywords: mobility, CEE-born young people, place-making, memory, feelings, Sweden

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Introduction

A growing volume of research focusing on the transnational mobility of middle-class youth and second-generation young migrants has highlighted the importance of place, space and localities in how young migrants transform their kinship ties and other intimate relationships, as well as the non-linearity and fluidity in these processes (e.g. Habib and Ward 2020; Haikkola 2011; Harris, Baldassar and Robertson 2020). The research on contemporary patterns of global and European family mobility has, in its turn, highlighted the diversity in childhood and young people's lives which is driven, among other things, by their noticeable involvement in transnational family mobilities and translocal ways of life (e.g. Assmuth, Hakkarainen, Lulle and Siim 2018; Farrugia 2015; Freznoza-Flot and Nagasaka 2015).

The mobility of the young people on whom we focus here pertains to this specific context – family mobility within the EU – which, since 2004 has prompted significant numbers of migrants to seek employment and settle in another EU member state. As members of these families, children and young people born in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have been extensively studied as the 1.5 generation of migrants (Assmuth *et al.* 2018; Jørgensen 2016; Moskal 2015; Sime, Moskal and Tyrell 2020; Tyrell, Sime, Kelly and McMellon 2019). This literature broadly suggests that, compared both to their parents (as the first generation) and their younger siblings who were born in the country of destination (the second generation) the 1.5 generation of migrants occupy a unique place of 'in-betweenness' (Tyrell *et al.* 2019). Tyrell *et al.* (2019: 3) identify several important aspects of the position 'in-between', including 'a) in-between origin and destination; b) in-between youth and adulthood; and c) in-between majority and minority culture in the host society'.

By applying the designation of 1.5 generation to the participants of this current research, we attempt to shed light on the complexity of their place-making processes, while navigating their multiple positions of being 'in-between'. More specifically, the article examines how mobility (re)shapes the connection to and meaning-making of places post-migration, as exemplified by the experiences of adolescents and young adults born in Poland and Romania who, as children (up to the age of 18), moved to Sweden either with or after their parent(s).

We argue that the experiences of mobility and upbringing among CEE-born young people living in Sweden warrants further exploration for several reasons. Sweden is often overlooked as an empirical site in European comparative research on youth mobility (see, however, Shmulyar Gréen, Melander and Höjer 2021). Little attention has been given to the growing popularity of Sweden, since 2004, as a country where employment is possible, together with reunification and longer period of settlement for European migrants and their family members (although see Melander and Shmulyar Gréen 2018; Melander, Shmulyar Gréen and Höjer 2020; Shmulyar Gréen and Melander 2018). According to some estimations, of the nationals from EU countries residing in Sweden in the year 2020, 93,762 and 32,741 were born in Poland and Romania respectively (Delmi 2020). The large-scale outmigration from Poland and Romania to other EU countries – and to Sweden in particular – differs in several respects (see Shmulyar Gréen and Melander 2018). What is important, however, is that, in legal terms, Polish and Romanian nationals and their offspring have not been considered as *migrants* per se. Moreover, due to the rhetoric of free mobility and assumed 'sameness' (Waerdahl 2016), Polish and Romanian families and their children tend to easily 'disappear' in official statistics, as well as to be treated as 'invisible' in migration research. Statistics Sweden (SCB 2020) indicate that, in the year 2018, 9 per cent of all children under 18 years old living in Sweden were foreign-born, with Poland being the fifth most-common country of birth. For the purposes of this research, we rely on descriptive data from Statistics Sweden (SCB 2019), estimating that approximately 23,000 CEE-born young people, with Poland and Romania the most frequent countries of origin, resided in Sweden together with their families in 2018.

In this article we draw on the experiences of 18 of these young people, aged 16 to 29, who have lived in Sweden for at least four years. Common to their life trajectories is that most of them first experienced family separation due to the circular mobility of one or both parents between the home country and Sweden, followed by a few years of living at a distance from their parents and, finally, joining their parent(s) in Sweden. An analytical focus on place-making is one of the central research questions in the broader research project¹ upon which this article draws and as part of which we asked young people about the everyday places (physical and virtual) through which they extend and develop meaningful relationships post-migration. Combining two-step qualitative interviews, in which – among other visual methods – we used drawings and photographs produced by the participants, the article makes two contributions. First, it integrates the scholarship on children and youth mobility, translocalism and place-making but also deepens these conceptualisations by underlining the role of memories and feelings in young people's place-making processes. Second, the article suggests that visual methodology is a valuable tool with which to generate narratives about the embodied and material practices of translocal place-making over time.

Translocal childhoods and youths through the lens of place-making

The starting point in theorising our 1.5-generation children's and young people's sense of in-betweenness is the 'mobile childhoods' approach developed by Fresnoza-Flot and Nagasaka (2015). Through the lens of 'mobile childhoods', we highlight that children's and youth's individual experiences of mobility are embedded within at least three underlying processes – mobilities in 'space, time and context' (2015: 29). This conception is particularly useful to understand how young people, due to family chain mobility to Sweden, are compelled to develop connections and ties 'across varied and multiple distances' and spaces (2015: 28). In other words, even if their own spatial mobility has been postponed due to longer periods of separation, they may experience contextual mobility, for instance, by imagining 'abroad' and by extending their meaningful social relationships to other locations, connecting them to families and other people whom they care about (e.g., Haikkola 2011). Using the lenses of the 'mobile childhoods' approach makes us attentive to the fact that, when young people talk about their own spatial mobility as children, they describe mobility not only in space but also in time and in a number of other overlapping contexts. They experience mobility in terms of changing both the social (schooling, housing, social class) and political (citizenship rights, welfare regime) aspects of their lives and also the cultural (language) and symbolic (identity, memories) aspects (Fresnoza-Flot and Nagasaka 2015). At the same time, their current narratives reveal an emotional dislocation and longing through the young migrants' memories of their mobility as children both in context and in time.

As a complement to the 'mobile childhoods' approach, we use the notion of migrant translocalism in research with children (Assmuth *et al.* 2018; Moskal 2015). Assmuth *et al.* (2018: 7) designate the notion as 'grounded transnationality', pointing out the 'situatedness during mobility' – meaning that children's and youth's mobilities are embodied and locally attached. The concept underlines that, while being mobile transnationally, the young people in our study leave the towns and villages where they were born and move to places where they may have family members or where their parents were able to create a livelihood prior to their children's own mobility to Sweden. Using the concept of translocal mobility in her study, Moskal (2015) shows how migrant children and youth appropriate new places at destination and turn them into meaningful spaces through their daily routines and interactions.

Obviously, the translocal perspective on children's and youth's mobility makes relevant the concepts of place, space and locality/territory (Farrugia 2015; Haikkola 2011; Harris *et al.* 2020; Marcu 2012). The concept of place, extensively theorised in human geography and psychology (e.g. Massey 1994) and, by extension, in the sociology of mobility and belonging (e.g. Gustafson 2002), is a notion with multiple meanings, including

references to the ‘immediate context, imagined places and aspirational places’ (Habib and Ward 2020: 173). The notions of space and place are interlinked, as ‘places are spaces which people have made meaningful’ (den Besten 2010: 182). In our analysis, we define places as ‘articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings’ (Massey 1994: 67) that are stretched out ‘at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the more global’ (1994: 264). Following this line of thought, place is analysed as a dynamic entity, shaped by temporal, experiential and affective processes, where young migrants may occupy differentiated positions due to the ‘power geometries that can be traced to economic, social and cultural processes that span the globe’ (Farrugia 2015: 613). This means that, due to mobility, children and young people may gain an access to new opportunities within spaces such as education, work, free-time activities, etc.; however, ‘there are forms of exclusion and control that take place in and through space’ (2015: 617).

In our quest to understand how mobile youth construct transnational connectivity between places and spaces both prior to and post-migration and how they overcome the processes of ‘othering’ and feelings of being ‘out of place’, the notions of memory (Fox and Alldred 2019; Keightley 2010; Leyshon 2015) and emotions (den Besten 2010; Marcu 2012) are useful. The wider project upon which this article draws, underlines the importance of affective bonds in migrant children’s and youth’s everyday lives, including the ‘practices of love, care and solidarity’ (McGovern and Devine 2016: 38), which mediate their attachments to people and places (see Shmulyar Gréen *et al.* 2021). In this article, we call attention to the role of memory in these processes. As Marcu (2012: 207) argues, ‘different places create experiences that, at the same time, produce memories which are wrapped in feelings and that play an important role in constructing identity’.

Principally, all interviews collected for this research are retrospective accounts, produced by the young people in their late teens or emerging adulthood, who had a migratory experience as children. Thus, their present stories are grounded in memories of childhood, upbringing, friendships, the departure of one or both parents to Sweden, their own migration as a child and growing up in a new country. According to Fox and Alldred (2019: 27), these retrospective accounts can be defined as personal memories, which are ‘materially affective’, as they both mediate young people’s past experiences but also produce an embodied material affect on their current lives. In a similar vein, Keightley (2010: 5) defines memory ‘as a lived process of making sense of time and the experience of it’.

In line with these definitions, this article sheds light on how memory and remembrances of the past have the capacity to transform the present experiences of young Poles and Romanians in Sweden. Thus, constructing their personal accounts through visual images helps to elicit how memories work. As highlighted by den Besten (2010), when talking about drawings or photographs related to places that matter in these young migrants’ current lives, they tend to reveal strong emotional attachments shared between them and the locations back in their homelands. Leyshon (2015: 626) takes this point further by underlining that ‘memory is mobilized into a practice of self through both the creation of memories and the recall of affect’. In other words, memories about places in the past are closely intertwined with the production of personal identities and emotional bonding in the present.

In what follows we outline how the theoretical concepts discussed above underpin the methodological choices and empirical results set out below.

Research participants and methodology

Engaging children and young people in post-accession European mobile families in research in Sweden is a novel and still emerging research practice, in which we are making the first exploratory steps (e.g. Shmulyar Gréen *et al.* 2021). In our research project, we met a total of 18 participants from Poland (n=12) and Romania

(n=6). We interviewed most of them on two occasions – and some on either one or three occasions – between May 2019 and April 2021.

The recruitment of interviewees² took place through multiple channels, including mother-tongue language courses, Facebook posts, visits to Polish and Romanian churches, contacting gate-keepers within the Polish and the Romanian communities in Gothenburg and some snowballing. The criteria for selection were young Poles and Romanians who had arrived in Sweden before turning 18 to join one or both parents and who had been living in the country for at least two years. For the recruitment of the interviewees, we used information letters and the project's advertising cards in three languages – Polish, Romanian and Swedish – to encourage potential participants to pick the language with which they felt the most comfortable, while consenting to take part.

In our sample, 16 participants arrived in Sweden as children under the age of 18 and two were just turning 18. A common pattern was that young people, together with their mothers and, in several cases, their younger siblings, joined their fathers, who came to work in the country after Poland's and Romania's accession to the EU. At the time of the interview, their ages ranged between 16 and 29 years old (the majority of them under 25); most of them lived in the Gothenburg region, some were enrolled in high school, while others were studying at university or working. Contrary to our initial intention to engage more-recent arrivals in our study, the interviews turned out to be more retrospective in character, whereby some young people had arrived in Sweden four years ago and others had lived there for 12 years. The participants' stories thus contained both retrospective accounts of their childhood and migration experiences and current important events in their lives, which we analysed using their own interpretations linked to the broader context of their mobile lives (den Besten 2010; White, Bushin, Carpena-Méndez and Ní Laoire 2010). All the interviews were conducted in Swedish and transcribed *verbatim*. The choice of the language was a matter of negotiation, as most of the respondents said that they preferred to speak Swedish while being interviewed. If any language difficulties emerged during the interviews, we asked the participants to either express themselves in their native language or in any other language that they and the researchers shared – for instance in English.

The research methods were attuned to the idea of agentic children/youth, regarding them as 'competent and accomplished research participants' (White *et al.* 2010: 144) even if their language competence varied. In order to prioritise the issues that young migrants themselves deem important to talk about, we used a combination of qualitative interviews and visual materials, such as life-lines, network maps (Pirskanen, Jokinen, Kallinen, Harju-Veijola and Rautakorpi 2015) and drawings or photographs (Luttrell 2010; White *et al.* 2010) produced by the participants themselves. It is important to underline that the visual images were both a starting point in the construction of the young people's personal narratives as well as meaningful facilitators of further communications between the participants and the researchers. In line with Luttrell (2010: 224), a visual methodology provides researchers with a 'need-to-know-more stance' allowing them to interpret the linkages between young people's images, voices and narratives in specific contexts. In such a way, the value of this methodology is that it invites young people to 'make deliberate choices to present themselves and others' (2010: 224) through the relationships and networks which play(ed) an essential role in their own lives. At the same time, self-produced photographs and drawings can ease awkwardness when talking about sensitive issues in the face-to-face setting of an interview, allowing the young people to reflect freely on the content and the subjective meaning of the images they choose to share.

In this article, we focus mainly on the analysis of the drawings and photographs related to meaningful places and on the narratives produced in relation to these during the interviews with 11 female and seven male young people. The empirical material is composed of 37 interviews and 21 photographs and drawings that the participants chose to share with us during our meetings. The drawings and photographs were produced by the participants in the time between the first and the second interview in order to identify places and spaces which

were less available to us as researchers; this means that the process of production of most of the images is outside the scope of this article (e.g. White *et al.* 2010). Importantly, we did not instruct young people to produce any particular kind of image but, instead, asked them to document ‘whatever matters most’ (McGovern and Devine 2016) in physical places and virtual communities in Sweden, in their home countries or elsewhere in the world. To maintain our focus on significant relationships and everyday encounters, we suggested that young people thought of places where they felt included, socially recognised and at ease – or, on the contrary, places which they tried to avoid or from which they were excluded. Initially we assumed that the younger the participants were the more often they would choose to draw before taking photographs. It turned out instead that, independent of their age, the participants drew on fewer occasions, often referring to the fact that their drawing skills were ‘primitive’ (White *et al.* 2010: 152). Not all young people remembered to bring the drawings or photographs with them and some images shared with the researchers could not be used as illustrations in publications for ethical reasons, as they contained pictures of family members, friends or distant relatives. However, ‘talk on places that matter’ was present in all interviews, with or without the illustrative support of visual images.

While analysing the visual images produced by the young migrants, we followed Desille and Nikielska-Sekula (2021: 7) in their understanding that ‘context is crucial if we are to convey any trustworthy research findings through images’. Thus, in our analysis, the visual images were not treated as independent empirical data *per se* but, rather, as within a context of young peoples’ narratives about mobility and socio-spatial practices of re-building significant relationships post-migration (e.g. White *et al.* 2010). Grounding our interpretations of the visual images, we analysed all the interviews using NVivo software to organise and classify the data. The specific thematic codes were refined into sub-categories, including the themes of places and of inclusion and affectionate closeness versus exclusion and misrecognition, which were analysed in more detail through memo writing and systematic comparison.

When it comes to the analysis of images *of* and *talk about* places, we developed an analytical strategy following Leyshon’s (2015: 634) idea that place provides a position from which ‘the self can speak to itself and to others’. In this way, images of and talk about places served several purposes, including becoming a point of departure for accounts of memories, facilitating communication and trust between us as researchers and the participants and invoking emotional and sensorial experiences that helped young migrants to reflect about events and experiences they had rarely been asked about before (see e.g. Desille and Nikielska-Sekula 2021; White *et al.* 2010). Avoiding an over-interpretation of the images’ quality or becoming ‘visual translators who tell the viewer “what they should see”’ (Moskal 2010: 26), we sorted the drawings and photographs according to analytical categories suggested by Gustafsson (2002: 22–23), including what, in their content, could indicate the geographical location of the place, the material forms expressed in the exhibits and, finally – supported by the narrative accounts – what meanings the young people ascribed to the spaces they considered important.

While acknowledging the richness that the visual images brought to our understanding of young peoples’ place-making, we are aware of the potential weaknesses and the sensitivity inherent in these methods. To name but a few, visual images produced and talked about by the participants provided an ‘excess of information and impressions’ (Frers 2021: 88), far too rich compared to what we were able to capture in the analysis. The multi-sensory nature of the visual material, including the voices, the smells, the affection or the sadness are hard to account for through static images. Moreover, while drawings were mainly recently produced for the project, the photographs were more often dug out from drawers or from the young people’s photo libraries in the mobile phones and the people depicted in the images could not be asked for consent for taking part in the research. Thus, guided by the ethical rules aimed at anonymising and reducing the risk of cross-identification, we had to minimise the personal character of these images and, in some respects, defy young migrants’ agency to decide their own terms of self-representation.

Findings

The overall results of the analysis highlight that, while being mobile, young people actively preserve their connections to the distinct places of their childhoods and, at the same time, demonstrate strong attachments to new places in specific localities and spaces post-migration. Among the 21 images that the young people chose to share with us, all but two had a clear geographical location. Roughly half of all the images showed places located somewhere in Sweden while the other half showed places and spaces in the home countries of Poland or Romania. In their content, the photographs and drawings contained portraits of the participants' nuclear and extended families, friends', families' and grandparents' houses, personal dwellings and classrooms, church gatherings, streets, animals and images of nature. Among the places and spaces that the young migrants chose to talk about, instead of providing visual data, they talked about parental homes, schools and school yards, shopping centres, large cities in both the home and foreign countries, as well as workplaces, neighbourhoods and digital spaces. While most of the place images were quite unique and some were quite personal, all of them portrayed the 'triviality of the everyday' (Desille and Nikielska-Sekula 2021: 16), such as 'hay balls in a field', 'a garden in the countryside' or 'a street in the home town'.

When analysing young Poles' and Romanians' own narratives related to each of the place images or about the places that mattered to them, four salient meanings of places emerged. Firstly, a larger group of place images initiated memories, symbolising feelings of mutual care, familial love and learning attached to their birth countries and their relationships to close and extended family members in both the past and the present. Secondly, another important meaning conveyed by the images related to places where young people felt at ease, safe and familiar within the new environments post-migration. Thirdly, several images illustrated the participants' rooms and flats, conveying an important meaning of emerging adulthood, which young migrants had to 'work' hard for in order to accomplish their personal development and to feel independent and self-confident. The fourth important meaning emanating from the place images, invoked feelings of being excluded and misrecognised as well as the coping strategies used in places both in Sweden and in the country of birth.

Mutual care, familial love and learning

As mentioned above, the half of the visual images centred around people, houses, fields etc. back in the countries where the young participants were born. The most lively discussions during the interviews were about the drawings and photographs showing the places where participants' grandparents and other kin currently live, back in Poland and in Romania. The meanings attached to these places were described in terms of mutual care, familial love and learning. Antoni came to Sweden from Poland when he was almost 18 years old. When he was a teenager, his parents and his younger sibling moved to Sweden, while Antoni decided to remain with his grandparents. Now aged 25 and living in Sweden himself, he visits Poland quite often and especially the village where he grew up.

This picture was taken two weeks ago, when I visited Poland. Here you can see some hay balls in a field and a tractor. (...) With this photo I want to show you a place which reminds me of the time when I was a child. It was the most fantastic and carefree period in my life. The picture is taken just outside the house where I grew up before my parents moved to Sweden. When they did, I had to move in with my grandparents in another village. (...) The tractor you see belongs to my uncle, who runs a farm. It is the same tractor that I used to drive together with him. (...) He let me steer the wheel and it was just a dream for me as a child. (...) He taught me how to drive a tractor when I was quite young and when I got older, I could ride across the fields on my own. (...) It felt great and exciting, I did something that was fun, that I liked a lot.

(...) I could, at the same time, help my cousin, my uncle's son; he was younger than me and I felt as if I was his older brother and could teach him things. (...) I mean to say that this indeed was a good time in my life even if it was 'an orphan period'. In this place, it was easier for me to accept that my parents had moved [to Sweden] because my uncle and his wife became my extra parents.

Figure 1. Photograph of hay balls in a field

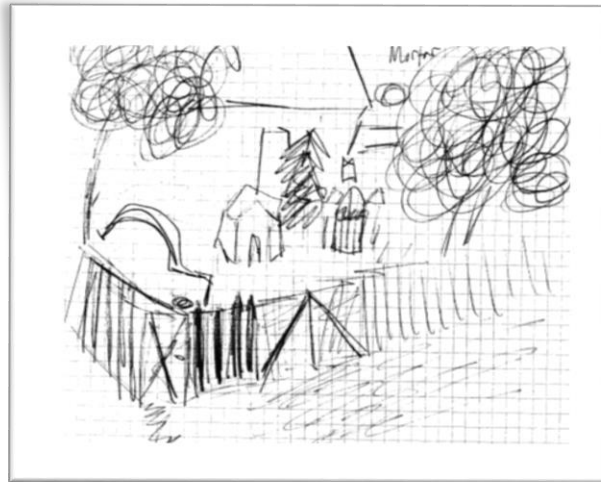


To an outsider, the photograph which Antoni shared (Figure 1) might appear uneventful and impersonal. However, in line with findings by den Besten (2010: 191), for Antoni, who is a young adult, this image of the field with hay balls is 'treasured for its ability to symbolically recreate the homeland left behind'. The place he talks about with such devotion is still important to him because it reminds him of 'a carefree childhood' and also of people who took care of him and made him feel safe and loved. Another important connotation of this image is that his 'extra parents' taught him important skills in life. A sense of responsibility and active care for others, as well as practical knowledge about how to drive, were, following (Fox and Alldred 2019), materialised and deepened later in Antoni's life due to the positive memory he had of being trusted and believed in as a young child.

Vera (aged 18), another participant from Poland, went to Sweden at the age of 6, together with her mother and younger siblings, to join their father, who had been working in Sweden for some years. She drew several sketches of places she wanted to share with us, one of them her grandparents' house (Figure 2).

It is the grandparents on my mother's side that I mainly keep in touch with. It is also with them that my boyfriend has developed some kind of relationship. They like him. I do not have to worry about them starting arguing or something. (...) I feel I got a bit of my granny's character. (...) When she sets her mind to something, she does it herself in her own way. (...) She has such drive. She is getting older now, but she gets things done, she is just that kind of person. I remember one summer [when I was younger] and my mother had to take her driving licence, me and my brother stayed with our granny during the day, when my mum was away. (...) My granny is just such a person. She supported my mother quite a few times. [When I visit her now], I feel I can really talk to her and I realise that I really need it.

Images of country houses and fields often feature in the visual data of this project because, for Antoni, Vera and practically all the other participants, mobility to Sweden implied a transition – from living in small towns and villages and being socialised within their extended families, to the suburbs of the larger Swedish cities where they had to manage their lives without a supporting kin network. The young people's own mobility to

Figure 2. Drawing of the grandparents' house

Sweden also implied that their daily contact with their grandparents and other kin back 'home' has now transformed into a distant co-presence through visits and virtual communication on the phone. This is why Vera and Antoni, like several other young people in our study, said how much they missed and longed for specific beloved family members back home. Thus, the images they created carried what Marcu (2012) describes as an 'emotional echo', providing a connection to spaces where young migrants felt safe, cared for and loved, being surrounded by people whom they knew and trusted. While these illustrations can be perceived as signs of the absence in their lives of those places and being missed by someone there, they also bear witness to the building of active relationships that young migrants engaged in through frequent visits back to the countries of birth, daily calls to the grandparents and preserving memories of emotional and physical closeness as 'a sense of connection that exists in reality (...) but also in an imaginary realm' (Moskal 2015: 148).

Feeling at ease, safe and familiar with new environments

Another theme, notable in the images, relates to places and spaces beyond the circle of family, yet where the participants feel at ease, safe and in a familiar environment. Among the photographs expressing these meanings, quite a few depict new places in Sweden where the young migrants spent time with friends, romantic partners or on their own. For instance, several Poland-born participants shared images related to their activities with their co-ethnic peer group within the Polish Catholic community in Sweden (see Shmulyar Gréen *et al.* 2021). Other images related to Sweden show, for instance, a public library, a schoolyard or port cranes near the sea. Taya's story epitomises the ways in which young migrants appropriate new places and build emotional attachments to them post-migration. Now aged 20, she was born in Romania and came to Sweden at the age of 16 to join her father – a common pattern among the young people participating in this study. Taya was eager to share several images related to both her home village in Romania and her current dwelling in Gothenburg. One photograph, picturing a typical red Swedish cottage by the sea (Figure 3), stood out from the rest of her images.

My boyfriend's grandparents live in this house during the summertime. When he introduced me to them for the first time it was in this house on an island outside Gothenburg. At first, I felt why should I meet his grandparents for the first time in their summer house? It did not feel comfortable. When we finally met,

I realised that the atmosphere there was very much like in the countryside in Romania because everyone knows each other, the island is tiny, and everyone is somehow a relative to one another. It felt so relaxing to be there (...). That is why, now and then when I am stressed, or overwhelmed with schoolwork or just want to take it easy, we just go to this house on the island for a weekend.

Figure 3. Photograph of a red Swedish cottage



Taya explains that it took some effort to get accustomed to new people on the summer island. In line with Moskal (2015: 149), the atmosphere of a close community where ‘everyone knows each other’ helped her to ‘turn (...) the unknown into known’, to find a resemblance with her village back in Romania and to feel at ease. As Bennett (2011: 4) underlines, ‘knowing people around us gives us a feeling of security’. Taya’s and other migrant youth’s stories clearly illustrate the importance of familiarising oneself with new places and ‘being recognised as part of the community’ (Sime *et al.* 2020: 92) in order to feel more comfortable and safe. At the same time, these stories speak of the transnational connectivity produced through memories of places of birth and up-bringing with ‘the lived experience of locality’ (Moskal 2015: 149) in their new home country.

‘Peace and quiet’, relaxation and self-reflection

In addition to places, seen as important by the young migrants due to their interactions with other people, we want to focus on the places which the participants appreciated for providing them with a possibility for some ‘peace and quiet’, for relaxation and self-reflection. At the time of the interviews, 13 out of the 18 participants were young adults, studying at university or working. Several of them had just moved out from the parental home or were planning to do so. Privacy and autonomy, which their own apartment or a room in a family house could allow, were especially valued by the young people. In multi-child families, a private space was hard to find when they moved to Sweden, as several participants used to share rooms with one or more younger siblings. Antoni, 25 (18 on arrival) whom we mentioned above, described his newly acquired one-room apartment with pride and gratitude:

This is a photo of my apartment (...). The reason why I show it is because [this place] is a kind of oasis for me. (...) I like this place and I like to come back to it [after work] because it is a quiet place, where I can just relax. (...) It is a safe place (...) and I am so grateful that I could move and start an independent life here (...).

The emphasis on safety and relaxation, as well as privacy and independence, that Antoni accentuates also echoes in other research on young migrants' home-making practices (e.g. McDonnell 2020). Another relevant aspect of having their 'own place' is raised by 23-year-old Monica, who was also born in Poland but moved to Sweden aged 11, when she reflects on her own apartment as a space for a new stage in her life:

My new apartment [has a meaning of its own]. Not related to Poland, I would say, not in terms of being a childhood memory, but rather it [stands for] my adult self. I went through tough times [when I arrived in Sweden], but I made it. [The feeling I associate with the apartment] is a sense of confidence in myself.

What Antoni, Monica and other young people tell us is that getting their own place to live coincides with them entering a stage of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2000: 469). During this stage they go through different 'independent explorations of life's possibilities (...) when they can gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews' (2000: 479). For the participants in our study, one such an exploration is leaving the parental home and also becoming independent and self-reliant individuals. While these transitions are common to other non-migrant youth growing up in Sweden, for the respondents in our study, they are experienced against the backdrop of parallel processes related to the multiple ruptures and a sense 'in-between-ness' both in Sweden and in their birth countries (e.g. Tyrell *et al.* 2019).

Figure 4. Photograph of a bedroom



Another issue on which it is important to reflect is that their own apartment, their own room within the parental home and places in nature are all singled out as spaces for self-reflection and sometimes nostalgia about their childhood in their countries of birth. The fact that young migrants tend to situate their 'home' in dual or several locations depending on their attachment to places has been observed by a number of researchers (*inter alia* Fresnoza-Flot and Nagasaka 2015; Haikkola 2011; Moskal 2010, 2015). The story of Taya (20; arrived aged 16), whom we introduced earlier, clearly illustrates one more important aspect, namely 'the extent of the emotional, relational and cultural work involved in (...) re/making home' (McDonnell 2020: 6):

This is a picture of my bedroom [in the house in Romania]. Usually lots of plush toys everywhere. I must have them around me, I use them instead of pillows. (...) It may look quite childish, but it feels like me. [My parents] wanted to refurnish the room last summer, but I said 'No way'. I said, 'The only thing you can

change is the door', that you see in the mirror. Nothing else. (...) In fact, there are not that many plush toys left because I took them all to Sweden. [Taya shows another picture that appears to be almost the same] Here you see my room in Sweden, it is quite similar. We could not find the same type of sofa as I have in Romania, but it will do. It looks almost the same, just the bookshelf is larger. (...) I have all my papers there that I saved since kindergarten, year after year. I try to move all my papers from Romania to Sweden, bit by bit. My mom says: 'You cannot take them all with you'. And I answer: 'Yes, I can. (...) I have saved them all in boxes'. It feels fun to go through the papers and realise... [how I have developed].

Taya's description of the material possessions she took from Romania to Sweden suggests the importance of her favourite toys, furniture, school notes and books (Figure 4) for the 'humanising and personalising effect' (McDonnell 2020: 11) of her own current space. At the same time, holding tight to the material objects from her childhood in Romania in her room in Sweden, Taya tries 'to conserve memories of the past' (Fox and Alldred 2019: 22) that enable her to maintain a spatial and relational connection to her favourite place back in Romania, the house where her grandmother currently lives. In other words, while re-making her home as a young adult, Taya – and other participants – bridge 'the gap between past and present, and between here and there' (Moskal 2015: 149) and create a space where they can realise how much they have developed over the years.

Places of exclusion and misrecognition

Along with the places for social inclusion and appreciation, we asked the participants about the places where they might have felt excluded from or misrecognised. Only on a few occasions did the young people have images to share with us while talking about the instances of exclusion or a sense of 'non-belonging' post-migration. Among them were images of a shopping centre, symbolising 'a risky and unpleasant place' (Antoni, 25) or a mega city such as New York, standing for 'a modern and yet indifferent place' (Matilda, 21; 9 years old on arrival). While the meanings of these places emanate more from imagination than experience, these images were presented as a contrast to the places where the young people felt at ease.

There were other places where the young migrants did not feel that they were welcomed or where they had direct 'exclusionary experiences' (Fangen and Lynnebakke 2014: 49). Wanda, aged 19 (7 on arrival) and Faustyna, aged 23 (15 on arrival), both from Poland, described a growing sense of depreciation and not belonging while visiting their grandparents or taking part in family celebrations back in Poland. They both point out how they are 'losing a previously close relationships' and 'feeling unwelcomed' due to their 'new' way of life, faith or appearance acquired while living in Sweden. Other young people, such as Antonina, 29 (16 years old on arrival), also from Poland, talked about their experiences of being 'ignored, bullied or discriminated against' at their workplace in Sweden because of their migrant and religious background. Antonina landed a temporary position within a service sector, a 'dream job' in her own words, working on different tasks which did not require a university degree. She wanted 'to learn things through work' and was a diligent employee. After three years she decided to apply for a permanent position with the same employer; however, she received a negative answer, without really understanding the reason:

[The way the employer handled the situation] I felt I was being bullied and discriminated against. (...) I was anxious even being around that place. (...). For them, it was me who was a problem. [I dare say that it was] because of my [ethnic] background and my faith.

Antonina often used the lenient expression ‘I dare say’, indicating that she was aware that she talked about the experiences of being ‘out of place’, ‘othered’ and indeed discriminated against in a country known for its values of equality and tolerance of people with different ethnic backgrounds. Nonetheless, the way in which she and some of the other participants coped with similar situations echoes research by Fangen and Lynnebakke (2014), Sime *et al.* (2020), Zontini and Però (2020) and others who underline the growing ‘structural barriers (...) that limit the possibility of proactive responses’ (Fangen and Lynnebakke 2014: 55) on behalf of the young migrants in several European countries.

The most prominent examples of exclusion and insecurity were expressed in relation to the structural barriers experienced by the participants in places such as neighbourhoods and schools. Jonatan travelled to Sweden from Romania when he was 12 years old, together with his father, while his older sister stayed in Romania to finish her high-school education. Jonatan and his father joined Jonatan’s mother, who had found a job prior to their relocation to Sweden, where they settled together in an apartment in one of Gothenburg’s economically marginalised suburbs. In Jonatan’s own words, the first thing he saw on the street in his neighbourhood was ‘a guy running after another guy with a gun in his hands’. By recounting how he had to navigate the conflict and violence he repeatedly witnessed as a child in Sweden, Jonatan (now 24) admitted that, in order to protect himself, he had to learn the ‘rules of the game’:

I joined a gang, which was the best [shield]. No one could do anything to them. (...) I did it just to keep safe. So that they did not bother me (...) because I did not speak much Swedish at that time. (...) I was with them, or kind of. (...) I simply took their side to avoid being disturbed myself. (...) You have to be smart and play by the rules.

Even if Jonatan’s encounters with violence may appear to be extreme and out of the ordinary for most young migrants in Sweden, it speaks of a sense of marginality and insecurity in the place where he lives that pushed him to develop ‘mastery experiences’ (Fangen and Lynnebakke 2014) to avoid risky situations and ‘stay safe’. At the time of the interview, he disclosed that the experiences of vulnerability in his childhood made a clear imprint on how and where Jonatan saw his future, by striving to move from the neighbourhood where he grew up to safer areas outside the city of Gothenburg.

Other places, more often mentioned, where the participants said that they were struggling with social exclusion and bullying, were schools and public playgrounds in the school areas. An overwhelming impression surfacing from the interviews was the feeling of estrangement and loneliness felt by our young migrants, especially in the first years following their arrival in Sweden, when they had not yet mastered a new language and had difficulties in making new friends. Anna, 16, moved from Poland to Sweden more recently (aged 12) and appears to be very active in making friends and socialising. Despite her enthusiasm and openness to all new contacts in Sweden as well as her agentic attitude in asking adults for help, she admits:

I had lots of friends in Poland, I was a popular girl among peers in my class. (...) When I celebrated my birthdays, I used to have big parties with a lot of people at home. And here [in Sweden] it was just the opposite. For almost two years people treated me as an ‘air’, as if I did not exist. (...) I talked to the teachers several times and pointed out that no one talks to me at school and I felt lonely. I had to sit alone in the school canteen and eat lunch by myself, I had to do basically all things in school by myself. No one spoke a word to me. The teachers took up this issue once before the whole class, but nothing changed. They did not want to be friends with me.

Like the young migrants in Fangen and Lynnebakke's study (2014), Anna and some other participants did not give up when they faced obstacles to being acknowledged by their peers in school. When remembering these experiences during the interviews, Anna had ambivalent feelings about school as a meaningful place. She had to change schools and also classes to be able to cope with a sense of being excluded. While developing various tactics of resilience, she asked her teachers for help, talked with her fellow pupils despite her fear of being rejected and kept her mother apprised of the situation while, at the same time, trying to spare both of her parents from the painful details. In these struggles, Anna admitted that she was living in emotional distress and loneliness, spending a lot of time on social media. It was an alternative space where several other participants found peers – who shared the same mother tongue and had other interests in common – to befriend.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine how the 1.5 generation of Poles and Romanians who moved to Sweden following their family's mobility lead, (re)shape the connections and ascribe meanings to places post-migration. More specifically and from the perspective of significant relationships in the course of youth mobility, the article contributes to filling the gap in research on CEE-born young people living in Sweden with a focus on how they foster their ties to specific places and spaces (locally and transnationally) post-migration.

Emphasis is put on the analysis of the multiple meaning-making of places (Gustafsson 2002), following which four salient themes emerged. Drawing on the concepts of translocality and place (Assmuth *et al.* 2018; Massey 1994; Moskal 2015), the article highlights that places – as articulations of social relationships based on mutual care, familial love and learning – stretch beyond a particular geographical location in time. The meanings of these places are produced and reproduced in dialogue between the memories of childhood and upbringing before migration and young people's current perceptions of their lives in Sweden. Our results indicate that, through this dialogue, young Poles and Romanians actively compare their positive memories of places where they grew up with the new translocal places which they appropriate through everyday social practices in Sweden (e.g. Moskal 2015). Following Fox and Alldred (2019) and Keightley (2010), we argue that memories can be mobilised and materialised into a practice of self through remembering places and people who inhabited them in the past and by the active construction of role models for whom young people have become and who they want to become in the future.

As noted by Luttrell (2010: 225), 'the mode of visual research (...) is dynamic and relational'. Indeed, the article has shown that the in-depth interviews, generated through the visual images produced by the participants – such as drawings and photographs – are particularly valuable to 'ground the research in places and focus on the embodied experiences' (Desille and Nikielska-Sekula 2021: 3) of the young migrants. Apart from enabling young people to decide for themselves which issues they want to talk about, the added value of this methodology is the way in which it facilitates communication and builds trust between the participants and the researchers. It also promotes self-reflexivity and multiple identity constructions by the young people, beyond being a migrant (e.g. White *et al.* 2010). Based on this rich methodological approach, our analysis reveals that, due to the families and their own mobility, young people tend to develop multiple identities and attachments to people and places in both the country of origin and the country of their current settlement (e.g. Fresnoza-Flot and Nagasaka 2015). Moreover, visual images provide an important insight into how young migrants continuously negotiate the complexity of place-making and how they use memory and feelings to preserve, develop and reconstruct their social relationships post-migration, both in Sweden and back in their countries of birth.

Visual methodology has thus been a creative tool to facilitate the reconstruction of memories related to important places and people. In line with Leyshon (2015), by remembering and re-telling stories about important places, young migrants feel connected to those who care/d about them and become reassured about

where they currently belong. Regarding the second salient theme of place-making, the research discussed in the article suggests that feeling at ease, safe and familiar with new environments is enabled by positive memories of belonging, ‘knowing people’ (Bennett 2011) and a sense of still being a part of similar local communities in the young migrants’ countries of birth.

Drawing or illustrating these places through photographs, young people demonstrate the strength of connections to the home country, the importance of visits, the regularity of communication and the ‘hard work’ and efforts that lie behind the creation of their new homes, as ‘emerging adults’ (Arnett 2000). Fond memories of their own rooms and the houses of their parents and kin in places from their childhood serve as a strong emotional attachment to their countries of birth (Marcu 2012) but also as a material reminder of their past, which now serves as a stepping-stone for their present and future identity-building (e.g. Fox and Alldred 2019). These new and independent spaces are appreciated for generating the feelings of ‘peace and quiet’, relaxation and self-reflection, as a means for young people to come to terms with who they have become over the years. In places of their own or in nature, serving as a refuge for the challenges they may go through, young migrants engage in activities of remembering what they were appreciated for and thus transforming the places in Sweden into their new homes.

Finally, the findings also demonstrate that processes of inclusion and exclusion can occur together in the same places (Farrugia 2015). Being seldom represented by visual images, the places of exclusion and misrecognition have been identified translocally, related to the young people’s ‘everyday spaces’ such as schools, home, neighbourhoods and work. Recalling the examples of being bullied in school, being exposed to violence in the neighbourhood, discriminated against at work or not being loved and appreciated by both close and extended family members in either Sweden or the country of birth, young migrants reveal the personal challenges and structural barriers preventing them from becoming fully socially included (e.g. Fangen and Lynnebakke 2014). While the experience of being marked as ‘different’ had a negative impact on their self-confidence as young adults, the participants manifest an agentic position in avoiding these places, developing coping strategies or keeping an active distance from places and relationships in which they are not appreciated for who they are.

Notes


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2. The project was granted ethical approval by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority [Reg. No. 2019–02504]. Following the ethical guidelines, we ensured the participants’ anonymity and integrity by asking them to choose a fictitious name and by carefully concealing other personal data to avoid easy identification.


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Where Is My Place? The Second Generation in Italy as a New Kind of Transnational Migrant

Roberta Ricucci*

The topic of intra-European youth mobility has been under investigation for some time. This contribution discusses a particular youth migration, that of the children of immigrants who leave Italy to move to Northern Europe. What are the motivations behind this de facto migration? How much do discrimination processes count in the decision to move abroad and under what conditions and for what reasons do people leave Italy? This paper – based on my extensive qualitative research on young people of foreign origin, born and/or raised in Italy – discusses the opportunities and limits of these young people's coping strategies in the face of difficulties in inclusion and entry into the labour market. It does this based on the broader research project, by taking into account the mobility ideas, drivers and relationships between mobile youth and their (ethnic or not) social networks.

Keywords: young people, second generation, labour market, associations, skills, stereotypes

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Introduction

I have a Skype date with Valbona (27), who works as a junior accounting manager in Utrecht. A second-generation 'migrant' born in Padua to parents of Albanian origin, she studied economics and business management at the University of Turin. Her experience is that of an 'expatriate', as she defines herself. She is a young Italian, which she underlines several times, who has chosen to move to the city where she followed her Erasmus course in order to achieve professional success. A story like so many others in the last 10 years, many would say. A story of redemption, others would comment, dwelling on her origins, her accent and the comments on her migratory background when she mentioned her origins. These comments ranged from 'Albanians are all criminals' to 'They treat women badly and exploit them' to 'Worse than you there are only black people. You are in Italy to steal and take jobs away from Italians, pretending to be helpful'. When asked about her reaction to these words, she said:

...words that stay with you, they are like tattoos that you didn't want. At first, you cry, then something clicks and you just want to prove yourself, be the best. I've always been among the best at school, I've always liked studying (...) maybe that's why I've never felt different at school, I was well integrated, I did a lot of extracurricular activities, from the parish centre to the gym. (...) The first time I felt different was when a meeting was organised at school to explain a one-year study-abroad programme. I was excited. I was already imagining myself in Australia for a year. I arranged a private interview. I introduced my father and myself and, after a few sentences, we were immediately told that the programme was only for Italian or European citizens (i.e. EU citizens). I didn't immediately understand but my father did. I won't forget that scene: he took out his identity card, opened it and showed it to the person behind the desk, pointing out his Italian citizenship. He then stood up, saying that it was not the right programme for me. I was speechless and so was my teacher who was following the interview. We went out. The teacher joined us, saying that it would be a good opportunity for me and that everyone at school thought I was the most suitable candidate for that kind of experience. My father, again quietly, replied: 'A programme that wants to offer young people an intercultural experience should train its staff better, telling them that the accent or the work they do says nothing about people, other than their genetic history. We have a migratory background, we are not foreign'. There was silence. For the first time I heard about foreigners, about skin colour. (...) I went to Australia, but on a summer English course. (...) I never spoke with my parents about the episode again but, when I arrived in Turin, I met Sara and Atifah, my fellow students, who introduced me to the associations they frequented and where they did voluntary work and I discovered a world... It's strange how I hadn't noticed anything about what was happening around me among young foreigners, among the second generation (...) if you're not part of groups, if you don't talk about these issues with friends, at school, in your family, it's as if you live in a world apart. (...) Hearing some of the stories of those who can't travel or who have problems with documents, I feel privileged. (...) My parents protected me from the reality and mistrust, from the discrimination that affects those of non-Italian origin. And it affects us children, too.

Valbona finds that she was perceived as a foreigner, even though she has Italian citizenship. The surname that sounds unfamiliar, the unusual name for Italy, the family migration history are all elements that, as she says, become indelible 'tattoos'. They are, as the interviewee herself says, 'electric shocks that make you feel in the wrong place'. For many children of immigrants, it's about not feeling accepted, always feeling blamed for their family history and their parents' 'immigrant life'. Some young people, faced with such a situation – in which they feel they have to constantly justify themselves, explaining who they are, where they have been,

why they are no different from their peers – decide that Italy is not the place they want to live, where there is no future for them as people, professionals, parents, young people but only as children of immigrants (Ricucci 2021). However, the decision to leave to find a job in another country seems inescapable. To the daily difficulty of constantly feeling ‘out of place’ (Simola 2022) another bewildering factor is added: i.e. being young in an aging society where, for young people, the relationship with the labour market is both difficult and precarious (Croce and Ghignoni 2015). Here, Valbona explains these two variables which contribute to defining new migratory trajectories from Italy.

I'm working in Holland because I like it here and I think I can learn a lot, gain experience in order to work one day in an international organisation. (...) In Italy it's not so easy, as I said, there's still a long way to go, not only because there's resistance towards people with a migratory background, but also towards young people. Just think, if you're young, the child of immigrants, and a woman, and I cannot imagine what it could mean to also be black, Muslim and a lesbian. You can't succeed. (...) Here I found a job where I had done my internship during Erasmus. I had perhaps made a good impression and, I must say, I didn't know anyone: my parents work in the automotive field, so they certainly couldn't help me by introducing me to friends or acquaintances in finance or banking. (...) Yeah, you learn, when you go to university, the value of friendships, not only the value of people you can trust or talk to and go around like you do when you're a teenager... even us young people learn immediately the value of friendships and acquaintances, even in a negative way like when you comment that the guy got a good grade in an exam because he has a certain surname or because he knows the teacher... you know... but not everywhere is like that...

Ideally, Valbona's story could be part of a book on ‘brain drain’. Young, qualified, Italian, with a degree from Turin and a job abroad. Yet her foreign heritage might exclude her from a discussion on this kind of mobility: indeed, when the topic enters the public debate, the focus is on young Italians –which means Italians born and raised in Italian families, not Italians with foreign origins, like Valbona. In fact, debates on youth ‘brain drain’ only rarely deal with the outgoing mobility of the children of immigrants – the second generation. Both themes – the loss of the youth component and the economic prominence of the second generation – are topics of discussion that can touch raw nerves. They are also capable of highlighting the limits of the debate on them, in their positions and arguments, which are often not anchored to empirical evidence and are guided by outdated and anachronistic images. Valbona, as well as Elena, Dalina and other young women of foreign origin also cite, among the reasons for their departure, the climate of opinion towards diversity that affects large and small Italian towns (Chiurco 2019; Fondazione Istituto Carlo Cattaneo 2018; Ipsos 2018), highlighting the failure of actions, information and training on diversity despite the fact that the whole of Italy is now *de facto* multicultural (Ambrosetti, Strangio and Wihtol de Wenden 2016).

This contribution, based on the Italian case, discusses the topic of intra-EU mobility from the perspectives of a very particular group of young people – those who have a family (or personal) migratory background and who have developed migration projects from Southern European countries to Northern Europe. The aim is to highlight the reasons behind their migration decision and to discuss the extent to which they were (or were not) able to benefit from their own ethnic networks. The paper continues by framing the issue of youth mobility and its connection with international family migratory experiences before presenting the main actors, among whom are a little-observed category, namely the children of immigrants in Italy who – with or without Italian citizenship – decide to leave once they obtain a high-school diploma or university degree. Their reasons for leaving are numerous (Ricucci, Premazzi and Scali 2013), although the one that reflects the difficult transition from school to work is still the most significant: the second section is dedicated to this theme. Finally, in a world pervaded by social networks and biographies that unravel through photos on Instagram and posts on

Telegram, the ethnic associative environment continues to represent an important reference point for those who, while identifying themselves as ‘expatriates’ and not as immigrants, move with a rucksack or suitcase and a low-cost flight abroad. The conclusions to this paper discuss the findings, taking into account reflections collected from various Italian stakeholders.

Setting the scene

The children of immigrants are a significant segment of the population, in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Firstly, it is difficult to ascertain their numbers from a statistical point of view, given that access to European citizenship (a process governed by heterogeneous legislation) often does not enable the identification of applicants’ citizenship of origin and therefore their migration background. Equally, the children of mixed-nationality couples – with one parent a foreigner and the other an Italian citizen – also do not figure statistically, thus contributing to an underestimation of those who, in everyday life (at school or at work, through friendships, affectionate relationships or leisure activities) are treated differently – and sometimes discriminately due to their skin colour, somatic features, religious identity or accent – because they are identified as part of the heterogeneous world of the children of immigrants, a world which it is not easy to define (Heath and Cheung 2007). In the oldest European countries of immigration, second-generation concerns have attracted attention and space on government agendas as well as – albeit from a different point of view – scholars’ research programmes in various countries (for reviews, see Lutz, Brinbaum and Abdelhady 2014; Ricucci 2013). Several events (e.g. urban revolts in Paris, Malmö and London) forced attention to be paid to the mixed results of integration processes and to relations between different cultural aspirations, causing the dangerous re-emergence of intolerance and discrimination against, specifically, people whose origins are in Muslim countries. So it is that, in a climate of suspicion, the children of immigrants (who are sometimes European citizens) have once again ended up under observation, illustrating that granting citizenship is not enough to avoid differentiation and discrimination processes connected with cultural origins. Rather, such urban conflicts, which exploded especially on the peripheries of cities, are an indicator of the necessity to examine the effectiveness of policies relating to integration and the destinies of the second generation.¹

In the history of migration, passage from one generation to the next does not always mean upward social mobility. Sometimes, as various authors have shown, the children’s integration can even be worse than that of their parents (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters and Holdaway 2008; Schmaus 2020; Talpin, Balazard, Hadj Belgacem, Kaya, Purenne and Roux 2021). Declining academic careers and employment biographies are just some of the obstacles to the realisation of parents’ dreams of seeing their children fulfilled. Italy perfectly fits these traits. The country has been facing up to the presence of foreign adults and minors for about 40 years. Since the 1990s it has begun to pay particular attention to the component of minors in the immigration phenomenon, because of both their growing numbers and the challenges and problems which they present at the local level – from reception to academic policies, from free-time activities to relations with parents. As the data show for the beginning of 2021 (Istat 2021), the 0–18-year age-group represented 20.2 per cent of the foreign population in Italy; however, as mentioned above, the data only take into account those who hold a foreign citizenship, so that those with dual-nationality parents or migrants who have become Italian are excluded.²

Thus, the immigrant presence is neither a novelty nor a passing phenomenon. Children, even more than their parents, are an important element not only in Italian schools but in society in general, albeit the educational environment has difficulty in distinguishing between these young people (all Italian) and their parents (resulting from one or more migrations). Sometimes teachers consider the various generational belongings as a complete homogenous universe and fail to take into account the differences in terms of country

of origin or legal status. Those who come from an EU member country (in Italy they represent roughly 30 per cent of the foreign population) have more rights than non-EU nationals and should not actually, according to Italy's immigration law, be considered as migrants. As they come of age, the young people continue to go through a delicate phase subsequent upon compulsory schooling and to enter the labour market, discovering the extent to which being foreigners and 'children of immigrants' means being negatively labelled (Ambrosini 2019; Ricucci 2017). Among other concerns, young foreigners are worried about matters related to their juridical status. Being born in Italy does not mean automatically becoming an Italian citizen. Even when they do finally become Italian, it does not mean that they are exempt from stereotyping: indeed, even if the children of immigrants succeed at school or in their insertion onto the labour market, they are still often perceived as 'foreigners'.

However, having to prove to their parents that efforts made to guarantee better life opportunities will have a happy ending, while always being under observation – especially when the media broadcast negative episodes involving migrants – is an aspect which seems to differentiate foreign immigrant children from their peers of Italian origin. Yet, it is not only relations with their parents and other adults which should cause concern. The issue should also be raised as to whether foreign-origin adolescents are interested in changes affecting the youth population in general or whether their transition to adulthood presents particular characteristics. Reaching adulthood – i.e. the steps which are considered as the passage between being 'young' and being 'adult' – happens more quickly for the second generation than for their Italian peers (Argentin and Pavolini 2020; Panichella, Avola and Piccitto 2021). From this perspective, the second generation represents a novelty within the so-called Mediterranean transition to adulthood in which Italy fits. However, this awareness is not widespread. Indeed, the issue of the second generation emerges mainly when studying the educational path from infancy to high school. Rarely does the focus span the university level and the relationship with the labour market. Looking at these two latter topics, emigration flows from Italy to other EU or OECD countries represent one of the more interesting patterns of social transformation in the debate on youth. However, despite the high numbers and the importance in public debate, the phenomenon of young people with a migratory background who decide to leave Italy remains quite under-scrutinised, with the great majority of research focusing only on Italians with an Italian family background.

Methodology

Drawing on an empirical investigation which adopted a qualitative approach, the rationale for carrying out in-depth interviews stems from an assumption that they allow us to capture processes such as migrant experiences, values, the production of meaning and respondents' self-positioning on crucial issues such as identity, a topic which often causes conflict between generations in migratory contexts (Lareau 2003). This paper focuses on the plans for and experiences of intra-EU mobility by a sub-sample characterised by the common variable of being part of the migratory flows moving from Central and Eastern European countries to Italy. The empirical material presented in this article is part of the research project 'Youth on the Move: Naturalized Italians', financed by the Italian University Research Funds, which investigated the biographies of young Italians with a migratory background who have already left Italy – or are planning to leave – for other European destinations in the last five years. The project, carried out during 2016–2021, employs both qualitative interviews selected through the snowball method and a multi-situated ethnography in various European cities (London, Berlin, Paris, Lyon and Hamburg): 120 interviews – which, in some cases could be described as life-stories due to the fact that some participants were followed throughout the development of their life-paths and were interviewed on several occasions – and hundreds of pages of ethnographic observations were collected. Much of the material collected was analysed with Atlas.ti (for the stories) and MAXQDA (for the ethnographic notes). The project followed the life-path of young people sharing the trait

of being children of immigrants and belonging to the top 10 main foreign communities in Italy, according to statistical data at the beginning of 2016: Romanians, Moroccans, Albanians, Chinese, Ukrainians, Moldavans, Egyptians, Filipinos, Indians and Bangladeshis. This paper refers to 30 interviews with young people of Albanian (13), Romanian (10), Ukrainian (3) or Moldovan (4) origin. As with the whole sample, these respondents were also selected by snowballing, taking care to diversify the social and work environments to which they belong. Out of the 30, 20 are university graduates in Italy; the others have an Italian high-school diploma. The interviewees have been divided into two groups: 1) those who already lived abroad (i.e. the *movers*) and 2) those who were in Italy, yet planning their international mobility (i.e. the *planners*). The sample is balanced by gender and by generation: 50 per cent belong to the 'pure' second generation (i.e. born in Italy to immigrant parents); the remaining 50 per cent belong to 'generation 1.5', according to Rumbaut's definition (1997), which means having been born abroad and then arrived in Italy due to family reunion during their pre-adolescent period. All respondents were interviewed as adults and were required to sign an interview consent form, requesting their willingness to be contacted again for a follow-up interview. Respondents were also informed of the possibility of the research being abandoned and requesting cancellation of the interview. The data collected – anonymised (the names used, in fact, are fictitious) – were stored in accordance with data privacy and processing regulations.

Looking to the new generations

To set the scene more specifically, it is useful to remember the not-so-new story of how the relationship between training-orientation-entry into the world of work and professionalism continues to require in-depth study and, above all, policies inside and outside the school aimed at teachers, human resources managers and families. The last of these often lack the necessary tools, as Gelina, 26, another Italian of Albanian origin, points out.

The problem is that our parents do not know how things work in Italy, the schools, the university, but also what the sectors of the world of work are in which to invest because they will develop. There is total trust in the teachers, and then in compatriots who have already had the same experiences, even if it is not true that if you have had experience you are an expert in that subject... in this way you only do damage. My parents always said that my brothers and I should graduate from the university but no one helped us. (...) I'm not saying that no one helped us because I'm Albanian, no, it's not that. There is not much help in general. But if you're not Italian it's difficult, because of the language, because of the information that comes from experience, from having grown up in a country... or you're at risk, as happened to my brother who was directed towards a vocational training course by his Italian teacher, because she said he couldn't cope with a high school course and now he's graduating in engineering in an Italian-English bilingual course. (...) He has to thank an old retired headmaster who used to help him with his homework in the afternoons, who convinced my parents by explaining to them some characteristics of the Italian school and how also teachers can make mistakes and not always act, let's say, with clarity (Gelina, 26, second generation, Berlin).

Back in 2011, the then Governor of the Bank of Italy and now Italian Prime Minister, Mario Draghi, stated that

the difficulties faced by the younger generations should worry us. Not only for reasons of fairness. There is a problem of wasting their wealth of knowledge, their capacity for innovation. Italy's low growth in recent years is also a reflection of the increasingly scarce opportunities offered to the younger generations to contribute to economic and social development with their innovative capacity, knowledge and enthusiasm (Draghi 2011: 161).

These words have been recalled on numerous occasions since then.

Aided by a number of programmes to relaunch higher education and its link with the world of work, for some time now the attention of public opinion, policy-makers and research professionals towards young people has been focused on the increasingly complex relationship between education, guidance and the next step, tertiary education or entry into the world of work (European Commission 2018). The intertwining of the two – education and the labour market – is sometimes underlined as a lack (or delay) of the education system in the face of a profoundly and rapidly changing scenario and as weak, badly implemented policies for the orientation and professional integration of young people (Cedefop 2020). There is a ‘persistent and unrestrained’ outflow of emigrating talent, with a consequent drain of resources trained in Italy, from which other territorial contexts and economies will benefit (Coccia and Ricci 2019). Finally, there is the reappearance of controversies over the competition between young nationals and immigrants, in which the former – for many – should be privileged, according to a functionalist and temporary interpretation of a phenomenon (immigration) that is, in fact, organic to the country (Argentin, Aktaş, Barbetta, Barbieri and Colombo 2020; Boffo and Gagliardi 2017; Ryan, Erel and D’Angelo 2015).

It is clear that the numbers of young people not entering the labour market have created a marked social alarm due to the social effects of the consequences of their lack of an autonomous income and the risk that they will need to be supported by their parents and social services (Unt et al. 2021).

Three elements have recently complicated this already negative picture. The first concerns the resumption of interregional migration within Italy. In recent years internal mobility has increased again, especially along the traditional South–North axis (SVIMEZ 2021). A second aspect has to do with the so-called brain drain, an expression to which we should add ‘and arms’, given that it also concerns many less-skilled workers (who seek employment for example in the traditional jobs of catering and tourism). This leitmotif has become stronger in recent years, thanks in part to the emergence of blogs, communities and growing media attention: the departure of many young people is both an attempt to escape the lack of work and a strategy for reacting to an Italian system that seems to offer no opportunities. Some of these young people have a migratory background. The era in which many people did not want to repeat the story of their parents’ international mobility has ended and, in recent years, there has been a reversal of the trend. Finally, there are the effects of the economic crisis and the discouraging data of recent years on the weak, precarious and often under-qualified relationship between young people and the labour market (Bjorn, Schoyen and Sirovatka 2019).

If it is true that youth represents, in every society, a precious resource for which there is growing concern, often the simultaneous belonging to ‘other’ identities obscures the generational one: this is the case of the children of immigration, too often seen and, above all, studied as immigrants and not as young people. However, the demographic predictions for Italy in the near future call for the need to recognise this segment of the population, because the forecasts suggest a scenario in which this very special type of resource will become scarce. On the other hand, we are often faced with a society in which the voice of young people resonates with less and less force, not only because of their scarce numbers but also because of a third age (75+) that maintains its operational vitality (Istat 2020).

In this scene, where Italy still struggles to think of itself as a land of stable immigration and not of temporary presences, the possibility of dealing with immigrants (and their children) in terms of investing in the future of the country remains difficult for the majority of the population, especially when young people of migrant origin are perceived as ‘dangerously different’. Moreover, it is precisely the feeling of ‘being out of place’, of ‘not being well accepted’, that is a strong motivation to look for job opportunities outside Italy. As Cyprian (Moldovan, 26, 1.5 generation, Hamburg) remembers:

Cyprian: *It is not difficult to find a job; it is difficult to get rid of the looks of those who think that you are worth less than others because you are the son of immigrants. I have experienced it myself, every time they told me 'You are so good', 'We didn't think you could be so good'. And, what they wanted to say was 'Even if you are Moldovan, you are good'.*

Interviewer: *Aren't you exaggerating?*

Cyprian: *No, it's like a sixth sense that you develop year after year. Because in every environment you go to (...) no matter how well you speak Italian, how well you know the culture, how much of a football fan you are, you will never be accepted. I decided to leave and take a job in Hamburg because I wanted to stop feeling like a foreigner. Worse, an immigrant. Because we Moldovans are immigrants, we are not perceived as foreigners as a Canadian can be.*

Young 'immigrants' and the access to the labour market: stereotypes endure

Most of the interviews revealed different ways of relating to the idea of one's own migration path, following on from the pathway of the family of origin. Two distinct patterns could be observed, which are reflected in different behaviour, for example, from the point of view of learning a new language in depth. On the one hand, there are those (mainly among the highly qualified who have been pushed by their parents to gain a socially elevated position and among women without a Muslim background) who do not see a future in Italy (often for a negative judgement on Italian society), even if they maintain family and friendship ties in this country. They think of a definitive transfer; of the construction of a new and stable reality in another country. This position – which applies to around 60 per cent of all participants – is contrasted by the vision of those who feel, in the words of one interviewee, 'mobile for a long time': experiences, professional skills, in some cases savings built with effort by working abroad, are considered a (necessary) step to build their future stable working and family position in Italy.

Alina is Ukrainian. She grew up in Novara, a provincial North Italian town, where the Ukrainian community is large and well-liked. When she chose to go to university, she moved to London because, as she says in her 2021 interview:

it is an international city. Here, the difference in accent or skin colour doesn't matter if you know the language, have the required qualifications and demonstrate social skills. I am sorry to say this, but, in Italy, there is still a lot of racism. Towards everybody. It doesn't matter if you are not black. It is enough that you have some connection with immigration to be looked at differently. If you come from abroad to work as an engineer it's different, but if you want to make your way as a carer's daughter, your mother's role, your family's life story becomes a boulder. My mother has tried since middle school to make me hang out only with Italian classmates. Now I understand how she sensed that Italy, and the province where we lived, was not ready to manage cultural diversity. (...) Going back to Italy? Not for now. I chose to leave Italy and get away from my family to feel recognised for my work, my skills and my projects, not for the family history only confined to the migration experience. I feel that this is a double pain for my mother: I don't return to Lviv and therefore I don't contribute to the development of the country, nor do I stay with her in Italy (Alina, 27, 1.5 generation, London).

Alina has her future clearly in mind. The effects of differential treatment practices or perceived racist incidents in everyday life became an unbearable burden in Italy. The perceived social climate of exclusion becomes so heavy that it becomes the main driver of a new phase of mobility. Nevertheless, in moving forward in her

decision-making and effectively becoming a planner and developing a life abroad, holding Italian citizenship could be an asset, as 25-year-old Albanian-origin Mihaela points out in her interview in Turin:

I often think about what my future will be like after I graduate. I would like to go to Canada, to Montreal. There are opportunities for my film studies there... I will do it as soon as I get Italian citizenship. Unfortunately, I was already of age when my mother obtained it and she couldn't automatically transmit it to me. But I've been working for four years in a tourist agency and I've always lived in Italy and I applied last year. There shouldn't be any problems. Without Italian citizenship it would be more difficult, I think. We know that, as Albanians, we are known because we are migrants in Italy. But who knows our writers or our musicians...?

The interview extract above underlines the importance of Italian citizenship compared to the citizenship of some other countries in facilitating international mobility paths – obviously due to the principle of free movement within the European Union (a right shared with the citizens of all the states which are party to the treaties) but also because, in some parts of the world, one enjoys the symbolic status of a ‘friendly nation’ (Della Puppa and Sredanovic 2016; Finotelli, La Barbera and Echeverría 2017). The next quote is from Agon (Albanian, 29, second generation, Turin):

I would like to leave. If they would do me this huge favour and give me citizenship, I would disappear from here. I swear, with all the love I have for this country and this city, I can't stand Italy any more, I can't stand it. I don't really know where I would like to go, anywhere where they consider me a little more. I'm looking for a place where I can at least exploit what I've studied for... but in Italy there are no prospects. I went around a bit, to evaluate the different possibilities, and I decided that I would like to go to Holland. I don't like France, even though it gives a lot of social support, but I really liked Holland. It's a country full of foreigners, it has a very good social system, there's a very good level of integration and they haven't suffered from the crisis like elsewhere. There is also a relative of my father's there... I wouldn't go to him, because I prefer to depend on myself, but having a connection always helps, it's important to have someone who gives you a hand at the beginning.

However, as mentioned above, next to those who, like Alina, choose to ‘go abroad forever’, there are those who give Italy a second chance, like Benko (25, 1.5 generation) interviewed in Turin:

As soon as we became Italian, i.e. when my brother and I received our citizenship, we started to organise our move to Hamburg. (...) It's not about escaping Italy, but about 'getting some oxygen'. Italy is not a country for young people, as they say. However, it is not a country for young people of foreign origin either. At least for the moment. My parents tell me it was like that for them too in the early 1990s, they suffered a lot. Then over time, the perception of Albanians changed. It will happen to us young people, too, I'm sure. That's why I don't want to leave forever. Italy is my country and it's here that I want to invest, with my own skills.

The interviewee, recalling how much the Albanian community has suffered in terms of stigmatisation in the recent past, recalls how for young people the choice to spend a period (working, but in some cases – although in a minority – also studying) abroad can be part of a coping strategy against negative stereotyping, by ‘passing themselves off as Italians’ (Romania 2004). The great challenge in this case is that professional skills built in another country, together with the removal from a daily condition of marginality, allows some interviewees to

build more 'solid' and well-accepted identity elements in the comparison with Italian society, detaching themselves at the same time from the most negative aspects of their parents' experience. This search for paths of upward social mobility, it must be said, often clashes with the rather closed and rigid reality of the Italian labour market.

The entry of immigrant-origin children into the world of work is often linked to a greater autonomy and sense of responsibility towards their parents than is the case for their peers of Italian origin. However, the main actors of the second generation are, at the same time, impacted by the changes and challenges affecting the condition of young people as such, regardless of their citizenship. It is therefore worth asking what, if any, peculiarities there are in their phase of transition to adulthood. Among them is the widespread feeling of being 'watched' by a society that does not fully trust them, especially when negative episodes involving migrants are reported in the media. Such an attitude is transversal – it does not matter whether or not you are an EU citizen, or if you were born in Italy or arrived there as a child.

Every now and then someone makes a joke in class saying that we are treated better because 'we are foreigners', so the teachers don't correct us and don't assess us like everyone else. Perhaps this is true when one has just arrived: I remember that, at the beginning, when the others were doing their essays, I would go outside to learn Italian. But after the first few months, the teacher told me that the time had come to do the essays and I started. The first few essays did not go well, but then I improved: my mother helped me a lot; she made me read two books a week and made me copy pages and pages. If she hadn't been there to help me I would have gone on the electrician's course, like my neighbour. (...) I want to do engineering like my father, but I don't know if I will work in Italy; here there are difficulties for Romanians, the Italians think we are all thieves. I try not to speak Romanian when I am around and sometimes I ask my mum to speak English (Helena, 20, 1.5 generation, Turin).

Young second-generation individuals enter adulthood more quickly than the average: the need to have a job and the desire to 'start a family' are both generally greater than for Italians, who tend to postpone the stages commonly considered to be a farewell to youth.

These aspects are not very present in the Italian debate (including the scientific debate) on second generations, which is mainly discussed with reference to students in compulsory schools and (more rarely) in tertiary education. In fact, this is a story that is still little understood. On the other hand, it is also true that the common imagination still seems to create an image of the children of immigration as eternal children or adolescents, and not university students, workers or those open to international working experiences. This does not detach the second generations from discussions on their family history, focusing on the problems and characteristics linked to the migration path.

However, they are first and foremost young people who are about to become adults at a time when there are very few clear prospects for their future. In this sense, they share with all their peers in Italy the fears about the possibility of finding a job appropriate to their education and goals; not merely the fear of not finding a job themselves.

We find an echo of these fears in the interviews with two Albanian-heritage university students, who lucidly portray how difficult and, at the same time, how strongly desired it is to build a future without giving up one's own multi-faceted identity. These words reflect a reality that is not uncommon in an Italian university today, far surpassing stereotypes and preconceived images.

They rarely ask me what job I want to do. Perhaps they assume that we children of immigrants have no ideas. I remember when we had to choose the university; someone was surprised at my choice to study law.

Then they used to tell me 'Are you specialising in immigration law?' (...) I have to deal with foreigners just because I have a foreign surname? When are we going to change? When will the way I'm looked at change? I was top of my class in my high school. No one made my origins clear to me, even if they were surprised at first. I don't know if this is still the case in schools, but it's like being surprised that foreigners are educated. (...) There is still a lot of ignorance around. I want to become a magistrate, because my grandfather was a magistrate in Albania and I have a deep respect for the law. (...) I know, you have to study a lot, but my parents support me and I am a very determined person (Elena, 25, Italian of Albanian origin, second generation, Turin).

I am studying business management and statistics and I am very satisfied. I would like to work in an international company, which is why I chose the English course. I think I will then specialise in Islamic finance. It's a reality that fascinates me and has great potential here in Europe. When I say this, some people smile... and I know what they think: you are Muslim and it will be easy for you. Without waiting, I immediately say that the greatest scholars and those who deal with it in Europe are not Muslims. It's as if to work at Ferrari you only have to be from Monza or Italian. The world has become borderless on certain issues and for us young people it is even more so. When we talk about the future with our friends, for us the borders are the world. A different perspective from that of our parents or teachers. And, it's not just a question of unemployment, as some politicians say. My friends and I have known for a long time that the future will be in one or more countries. Why be surprised? (...) Someone tells me that I think this way because 'I am used to it', because I was born in Albania, I arrived in Italy, I lived in three different cities. It's like saying that whoever is a migrant will be a migrant forever. Many young people leave Italy not only because they cannot find a job, but often because they are not valued, they are not recognised. All of them, Italians of foreign origin and Italians of Italian origin (Ylber, 24, Italian of Albanian origin, second generation, Turin).

In these quotes are many of the key themes of the debate on youth and immigration, sometimes based more on slogans than on actual arguments. Care must be taken to distinguish between perception and reality when talking about students' preparation and skills (are we sure they are not up to the challenges they face?) or doubts about their reference values.

The labour market in the strict sense of the term also comes up against a society that, as mentioned above, has difficulty accepting a multicultural reality and, on the other hand, is confronted with rather fragile balances in terms of employment opportunities (often precarious or 'off the books') and professional growth (Hawthorne 2021). In this case, the main obstacle is being able to recognise that the sons and daughters of immigration are not called upon to replace their fathers and mothers; somatic features and names and surnames that reveal 'difference' multiply the obstacles in the search for employment, even for graduates from Italian institutions.

Of course, many companies, especially large ones, have for some time been pursuing employment policies of positive discrimination, but the daily dimension is often that of precarious jobs, of research limited to small craft businesses or the service sector with low added value, of attendance at associations and active employment policy services, which, in a period of generalised difficulty, are less and less able to provide effective responses.

We should bear in mind that it is not citizenship that often discriminates but, above all, social capital, age or gender, which are still sources of prejudice and discrimination. However, the combination of these elements with family background can create, in a scenario of general economic difficulty, a sort of 'perfect storm' that

stands between the children of immigration and the ‘decent work’ referred to in the scientific literature and the policy documents of the institutions.

Ethnic associationism: still a port where to dock

The role of the ethno-national community as a ‘buffer and cushion’, at the moment of arrival in the new destination is fundamental. Today, as yesterday, for Italians abroad, associations represent a crucial actor in the relationship that is built up with the host society and its citizenship. There are different forms of aggregation, but all are characterised by the same objectives: material assistance, defence of rights, personal growth and, as far as religious associations are concerned, support in paths of faith and devotion. The difficulties are also shared: in relations with citizens, public services and local administrations and in the search for places of trust where information can be obtained. As several interview narratives testify (almost all of those who already live abroad), interacting with ethnic associations or national-based communities in a new context means receiving advice and useful information.³ Indeed, for example, Irina, a Moldovan girl working in London after 15 years spent in Italy, stressed advice she was given on being careful towards the quality of interactions: ‘Be careful not to confuse staying with integration... “All that glitters is not gold”’.

Furthermore, Lulzim, an Albanian man, underlined how useful was the possibility to meet other Albanians in Berlin for a better understanding of how to navigate the new socio-cultural context, mentioning that:

In any case, it was preferable for me to start again in another country than to continue to feel out of place in Italy, a country where I arrived when I was 16 and which, after 12 years, still made me feel foreign (Lulzim, 28, Albanian, 1.5 generation, Berlin).

Although ethnic associations are an important point of reference for compatriots, even in the world populated by e-communities, blogs and websites, they are themselves called upon to change in order to meet the needs of intra-EU youth mobility. There has been an evolution in the characteristics of ethnic-association leaders: alongside the ‘historical’ leaders of first- or second-generation associations, whose skills had been forged in the field and with the help of a social network typical of the new contexts of life (German, English, Belgian, French), there are younger protagonists with skills learned in more institutional training environments. A lively network of associations, including religious ones, is a key element in supporting the integration of foreign workers.

Energies are invested to build partnership relations, to conquer spaces of credibility and recognition: in other words, to become reliable interlocutors, expressing the desire to participate in intercultural policies in the neighbourhood, town or city (Marzana, Damia and Alfieri 2019). The aim is then recognisable, not so much – as during the migrations in the 1950s and 1960s – in the recognition of one’s own specificities, but rather in the right to diversity and the promotion of intercultural policies, in which cultural difference is one of the elements of the town or city’s social fabric and not a factor of conflict.

Lastly, but of increasing importance, online engagement is sought after, but alongside it comes the need for authentic, concrete relationships that go beyond friends on social networks. Young people, as several researches remind us, demand authentic relationships and coherence with the adults they meet: there is a greater appreciation and ability in front of which adults are called on to demonstrate concrete actions.

The issue that arises at the end of these considerations is the social commitment of young people who make geographical mobility their identifying feature. How can we ensure that the energies generously deployed have an effect on social relations and in terms of active citizenship? What is essential here is a dialogue between the institutions governing an area and all the cultural agencies operating there, whether or not they are dedicated

and exclusive to young people, but also more broadly. At the same time, attention must be paid to the so-called private social sector, which is able to put forward innovative proposals, in which bottom-up involvement and procedures become the key to action and definition of participatory processes, especially where these concern the young population.

Closing remarks

It is increasingly clear that the immigrant label can describe very heterogeneous biographical paths: stories of departures and arrivals, of different and complex legal conditions, characterised by multiple (invisible) barriers to the full exercise of social, civil and political rights.

The intra-European mobility of youth with a migratory background is just one of these potential stories. As the consequences of the post-2008 economic downturn affected, to significantly different extents, European labour markets, the intra-EU mobility landscape was reshaped by a decrease and a re-orientation of East–West flows and the re-occurrence of significant labour flows along the South–North axis. As a result, some of the main receivers of both EU and third-country nationals in the first 20 years of the 2000s turned back into net emigration countries, testifying to a significant dynamism of intra-EU mobility in response to political and economic changes. Italy, along with other Southern European countries, was among the main countries sending intra-EU youth outflows. And among those who departed in the last 10 years, there were youth, both Italians or still foreigners, with a family-migratory background. Discussing migrant children/youth mobility means considering their various paths, motivations and opportunities. These unfold differently depending on individual factors such as age, level of education, social class and characteristics of the family, migratory background, previous experience of mobility and the ability to rely on family members or friends abroad (Balduzzi and Rosina 2011; Della Puppa 2018; Rosina 2012).

The context also matters: the city of residence and its employment opportunities both intervene in defining mobility plans as well as the opportunity to collect information on potential countries of destination and their labour markets and welfare systems. Generally, the flexibility of the labour market, successive school reforms, public devaluation of the national education system, profound changes in local economies and the social fabric of urban contexts are some of the transformations that characterise the daily-life context of all the young people living in Italy, both nationals and foreigners (Bell and Blanchflower 2012; European Commission 2010; ILO 2013). Alongside these structural changes, the most important contextual change, which pushes young people to leave the country, is the long-standing economic crisis. As a consequence, looking for better job opportunities consistently appears as the main reason for leaving Italy (Centra and Gualtieri 2014); an experience, to measure oneself, to move to countries more open to diversity (of sexual orientation, skin colour, religion) or where policies addressing youth and supporting the transition to adulthood (e.g. post-graduate training, reconciling family and work, support during periods of unemployment, etc.) are more developed.

The children of immigrants share the same motivations as their native-Italian peers. Furthermore, other reasons can intertwine in their decision to leave the country. Stereotypes and discriminatory practices, which still continue to affect them without any consideration for their educational paths, their diplomas or Italian language and cultural proficiency, looking only at their skin colour, supposed country of origin according to somatic traits, visible religious (i.e. Muslim) signs and their accent. Furthermore, there are parents' dreams of success: as Gans (2009) pointed out, immigrant parents pour their dreams of socio-economic redemption in the country of immigration onto their children, even at the cost of asking them to leave the country.

Moreover, when trying to cope with these expectations and reasons, having Italian citizenship can be a strong point, which helps to react to the crisis situation (albeit in a limited way), especially by allowing greater resistance to discriminatory practices, both in the workplace and in the attitude with which one

approaches the quest for a job, whether as an employee or self-employed. Moreover, citizenship plays an important role in at least two aspects: the search for work in the public administration and international mobility.

As far as public-sector job competitions are concerned, they used to be reserved for Italian citizens, whereas today this barrier has partly fallen.⁴ The reason for this is that EU citizens – especially Romanian citizens in the Italian situation – are treated in the same way as Italians for all intents and purposes when it comes to taking part in selections in the civil service, but above all because of a European law that opens up access to the public administration for those tasks that do not require the exercise of the role of civil servant. Case law has also consolidated the principle of opening up competitions to non-Italian citizens; however, the large decrease in recruitment by the public administration in recent years has weakened the potential effect of this principle.

Considering the role of citizenship from a different perspective, acquiring Italian citizenship is a ‘free pass’ to move very easily not only in the EU but also in the North American context. A second migration – after that of their own family from their country of origin – thus takes place as a response to the recession; in a rather different context, however, and trying to exploit the training and socialisation pathway achieved in Italy. This migration project, it should be remembered, could also be conceived as temporary. In other words, a strategy to improve the experiences and characteristics of one’s curriculum, thus becoming more attractive to employers, including Italian ones.

Staying in Italy and trying to find their own way or leaving the country: these are the options. In the first case, trying to get a better job than one’s parents, or alternatively accepting (so to speak) a logic of ethnic segregation, which leads to unqualified jobs or, especially as far as entrepreneurial choice is concerned, to the chains of an ‘ethnic’ economy where employers and employees share the same nationality. In the second case trying to reach economies – and therefore job opportunities – stronger than the Italian one. Among the young children of European immigration, there is no evidence of a definitive move to the country of origin of their parents, as has been noted among the children of Maghrebi or Egyptian immigrants (Ricucci 2017).

The future of the second generation is weighed down by the difficulties of the first generation, of those fathers and mothers who still struggle to have their paths of inclusion recognised. The general imagination and the attitude of the media, which is incapable of objectively grasping the wealth of stories and potential, but also the hardships and problems that accompany the adult development of the children of immigration, also weigh heavily. The profound feeling of ‘not feeling at home’ may lead to new migration projects towards destinations deemed more favourable to young people and where there is a more positively expressed cultural diversity. Further investigation could confirm whether this is a broader Southern European syndrome or an issue that is particularly relevant in Italy, where anti-immigrant sentiment is growing and where migratory polycentrism (i.e. the cohabitation of numerous backgrounds and the presence of at least 15 significant communities in terms of numbers, according to Istat 2021) constitute specificities. The departure of young people (including those who have a migratory background) in all Southern European countries is a loss for the economy and for the socio-cultural vitality in general of its societies (Bartolini, Gropas and Triandafyllidou 2017; Mas Giralt 2016; Ricucci 2017). This is especially the case in Italy, a country among all those bordering the Mediterranean that, in fact, has in immigration and in immigrant families, an ‘energy potential’ to face a major demographic crisis of an ageing and shrinking population.

Notes

1. Immigration countries – and European countries in particular – have adopted different policies for immigrants which, since the 1990s, have demonstrated various limitations and failures, clashing with


their inability to respond to the needs of a population that is heterogeneous in background and increasingly interested in becoming an active part of society, while retaining their own specificities. From a theoretical standpoint, they can be placed on a continuum from assimilation leading to differentiated integration to segmented assimilation or differential precarity or exclusion (Foner and Simon 2015; Joppke and Morawska 2014), all sharing the fact that they have failed in the task of integrating considerable numbers of immigrants. The question remains as to the legacy of so-called national integration models. Some trace can be found in civic integration programmes, that is, in the procedures – both selective and formative (of the good citizen) – for verifying requirements such as the migrants' knowledge of the host-country language and civic culture if they wish to obtain or renew a residence permit or to access welfare measures. Thus, there has been a growing tendency over the years, on the one hand, to select entry policies aimed at delineating as much as possible the profile of desired immigrants (usually skilled) and already proficient in the language and culture of the new living context. On the other, there is an orientation towards training the newly arrived foreign citizen, through pre-defined and obligatory paths; the case, for example, of the Integration Agreement in force in the Italian context. A tendency towards a neo-assimilationist approach clearly emerges (Garcés-Masareñas and Penninx 2015). The profound transformations of immigration as a structural component of the various European countries yield plural scenarios, in which the heterogeneity of insertion paths, the degree of social, labour and cultural inclusion and the experiences of participation and civic protagonism of the second and third generations reinforce the usefulness of turning our gaze to the dynamics of inclusion that unfold at the local level, leaving in the background the complex (and unsolved) debate on integration, which should always be defined by context, group of migrants considered, legal status and cultural characteristics: all intervening facts in relational dynamics and inclusion in every sphere of society (Caponio, Scholten and Zapata-Barrero 2020; Ricucci 2021).

2. To date, the children of immigrants in Italy can obtain Italian citizenship in the following ways: 1) if their parents (or one of them) become Italian (according to the *jus sanguinis* principle); 2) if they are born in Italy and live there till they reach 18 years of age (they are no longer required to demonstrate a continuous and uninterrupted stay, even for vacations, in Italy), they can apply till they reach the age of 19 for Italian citizenship (only apply, there is no automatic positive answer). For further details see Dusi and Gonzalez-Falcon (2021).
3. All the participants mentioned that they know well the communities of expats from Italy and to use them also, especially for tips and advice on the daily-life in other countries. For the participants in this research who are graduates and already inserted abroad in the labour market, these online resources appear equally important as those managed by their own ethnic or religious groups.
4. Due to recent changes (2013) in the procedures for being hired in the public administration, it is mandatory to be Italian or to fulfill one of the following criteria: have an EU long-term residence permit (a former residence card); have a residence permit for political asylum; have a residence permit for subsidiary protection; have an EU residence card as a non-EU family member of an EU citizen.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Anxieties Regarding Family Return to Latvia: Does the Imagined Turn Out to Be Reality?

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For a migrant, returning to his or her homeland after living abroad can be much anticipated, yet also daunting, especially if return includes other family members who may have little insight into the cultural traditions and life approaches of the homeland. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative evidence from interviews and a survey of both Latvian nationals living abroad and returnees to Latvia, the anxieties concerning first-generation family return with (mostly) second-generation children are unravelled – particularly the challenges faced by the children. The paper explores the difference between an imagined family return to the homeland and the lived experience. Anxieties especially concern children's readiness for school – lack of home-country language skills, curriculum disparities and the often unsympathetic attitude of teaching staff towards returnee pupils. Preparation in advance, a resilient mindset and an avoidance of comparisons with the host country are found to reduce return anxiety for both parents and children and to ease (re)integration into the homeland setting. Home-country government initiatives offering support measures to returnees also help to mitigate the challenges of return.

Keywords: family return migration, return culture shock, returnee children, education, imagination, Latvia

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Introduction

If intra-European migration in a unified labour market often happens in response to major geopolitical events such as the expansion of the European Union, combined with individuals' quest for higher incomes and better career prospects (King 2018), it is often the case that return migration results from more subjective and personal motivations based more on strong familial ties (Gmelch 1980). Return migration might be driven by the desire to re-unify the family; yet when host-country-born children are brought back to the homeland country, their integration may be problematic. Their 'return' experiences are the main focus of this article.

On a broader front, research has found that, alongside the general acceleration of migration in Europe, with new types of temporary and circular migration, the trajectories of migration are diversifying (King 2018) – a result of the variety of life circumstances that led to the initial migration as well as personal reasons for migrants remaining in or moving on from the host country. There is a trend to move from less fixed, one-directional migration trajectories to more complex migration patterns and regimes, fuelled by globalisation and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). There is evidence of a large number of 'footloose' highly skilled migrants who have more loosely structured personal and family networks and who enjoy an 'easy' transnationalism (Ryan, Klekowski von Kloppefels and Mulholland 2015).

While transnational work may be a boon for highly skilled migrants, it can still prove to be a difficult juggling act when young migrants start a family. For most young, single migrants, the myth that 'the world is your oyster' is true until the reality of adult life hits and decisions need to be made about more permanent lifestyle options. For transnational families, return moves are also considered as an option, as other priorities start to surface when children come into the picture – if transnational lifestyles are still possible with young children in tow, they can prove more challenging when children reach school age and need more stability in their lives.

Previous return-migration research has focused on the economics of a return move, for example, cost–benefit evaluations of the return made by potential returnees (Arango 2000; Wahba 2022) or on the strategies of young adults contemplating life-course transitions that should improve their employment prospects and status (Corijn and Klijzing 2001). The motivation for return migration is, however, an interplay between economic and non-economic factors. Subjective decision-making may only appear as such on the surface and often needs to be contextualised in each particular migration scenario. Just as with migration where 'there is a history and context to that which is imaginable [which] includes such imperatives as the ability to pay for passage and meet all its attendant expenses' (Smith 2006: 58), in a return situation this can also be the case. Return can only be imagined and seriously considered when the context is conducive to return – namely, that returnees will have the means to support themselves (and their families) on return, have sufficient social capital for a return to succeed (contacts for job-seeking, family, friends) and be able-bodied and energetic enough to deal with challenges that may arise. For labour migrants a return would be irrational if none of these criteria were met. Yet, as this study shows, returnees are making decisions outside these economic and social-class parameters – they are also emotionally based and cannot fully be accounted for from a labour-market perspective.

Migration research often leaves out social and psychological factors that are important in return decision-making (Bolognani 2007), including within the migrant family. The purpose of this article is to explore these lesser-researched aspects of migration: the experiences of families – both parents and children – when planning a return to a parent's country of origin, particularly the inner dialogue that plays out in the minds of potential returnees regarding the ease of return and the potential challenges that may be faced.

Anxiety about how a return migration could unfold for a family with school-age children is a challenge to contend with. Questions typically raised by parents before the return move takes place concern job opportunities, options for renting or buying a property, negotiating bureaucratic labyrinths in the country of origin regarding

the tax system, potential visa and residency requirements for non-ethnic spouses and many other hurdles. These foreseeable obstacles also concern parents' perceptions of the ease of integration of their children into the new environment – for instance, the challenge of fitting into a new school setting, a different curriculum, insufficient language skills, being accepted by class teachers and other children. Worries about return prospects and challenges may determine whether a return move actually occurs.

This article puts the spotlight on families returning to the Baltic state of Latvia, which has, for the past few decades (since 2004, when Latvia joined the EU), been an emigrant sending country (Apsīte-Beriņa, Manea and Bērziņš 2020). The UK (the most popular destination country, with approximately 120,000 Latvian nationals), Germany, Ireland, Norway and Sweden were the main destinations for Latvian emigrants, particularly following the Global Economic Crisis which hit Latvia hard (McCollum, Apsīte-Beriņa, Bērziņš and Krišjāne 2017). Latvia witnessed a total net migration loss of 405,000 between 1991 and 2013 (Krišjāne, Apsīte-Beriņa and Bērziņš 2016), resulting in 15 per cent of Latvian nationals currently living abroad (Mieriņa, Ose, Kaprāns and Lāce 2017).

Despite the exodus of Latvians to other countries in Europe, there has been a recent trend for Latvian nationals to return to their homeland (Hazans 2020), especially for Latvians living in the UK. This return push started from the Brexit announcement, continued post-Brexit and has also been fuelled by job losses during the Covid-19 pandemic. News reports in the Latvian press (eng.lsm.lv 2020, 2021a, 2021b) and tracking by government-appointed return-migration coordinators on the return of nationals indicate that many migrants are returning with their families, some motivated by nostalgia and homesickness for family and friends and others attracted by decreasing wage differences and improved job opportunities in Latvia (Apsīte-Beriņa *et al.* 2020). For some migrants and their families, the return had been contemplated for a while and Brexit, coupled with the pandemic, served as the 'final straw'. For those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic, return has been more of a spontaneous decision. According to *The Economist*, in 2021 there was a pan-European trend, post-Brexit and pandemic-driven, for EU27 migrants to return back to their countries of origin (Charlemagne 2021).

This article looks at the variegated return experiences of Latvian families, combining the insights of both parents and children but with a stronger focus on the latter. It also outlines the support measures provided by national policies and home-country institutions which contribute to easing return and reveals the wider national context within which the return of migrants is set. A strength of this mixed-method study is the capability to not only draw on a large quantitative dataset and on qualitative interviews – where both emigrants and return migrants are addressed simultaneously – but also to look at return both prospectively and retrospectively. The voices of children have been largely overlooked in return-migration narratives. While some studies have looked at children's involvement in migration decision-making (Ackers 2000; Bushin 2008; Mason 2000), there has been a gap in research regarding children's moves to a notional country of origin. My contribution in this article is to combine the multiple perspectives of both parents and their children and to probe the thought processes and imaginaries of actual and potential returning migrants about a possible new chapter in their lives.

Migration and imagination

The nexus between imagination and migration has been looked at by scholars from a variety of perspectives. In considering the delicate dance between migrants' dreams and the actual, real-life options that are available to them and how they manifest themselves in migrants' lives, Chambers (2018: 1424) has reflected:

Imagining is not an act of absent-minded pondering but, instead, directs engagements with the material and is itself shaped through such engagements. (...) However, migration, its effects and connections are also shaped by the imagination and simultaneously active in shaping the imagination – a process that is

self-perpetuating. (...) There are also various ways in which the imaginations of migrants can be subverted, co-opted, influenced and structured to meet the demands of labour markets both domestically and abroad.

The shaping of the limits of what one may ‘dare to dream’ opens up the concept of determinism and the option of choices truly available. Smith (2006) has argued that an often ignored facilitator of successful migration is class position. Middle-class migrants ascribe the success of their migration to their own efforts yet, for lower-class migrants, often ‘the reality does not live up to aspirations or dreams conjured up in the imagination’ (Smith 2006: 54). Smith’s position that ‘even the most utopian dream is dreamed contextually’ (2006: 54) strongly implies that there is a social and historical determinism to what a potential migrant dreams and that this is dependent on class.

Schielke (2020) states that humans are probably never autonomous and self-determined with regard to migration – they only appear to be. What seems to be an autonomous choice is often due to ‘invisible forms of support, infrastructure, privilege and resource exploitation’ (2020: 110). He posits that the trajectories taken show that the knowledge, skills and techniques of a migrant (human and resource capital) can be assembled and combined in a variety of ways in order for them to be useful for migrants’ (and their families’) future survival.

In other studies on the migration–imagination nexus, Salazar (2011) has tackled imagined economic opportunities, whilst lifestyle migration has also been viewed through an imagination-driven lens (Benson 2012; Bolognani 2014). Meanwhile, Koikkalainen, Kyle and Nykänen (2020) and Manolova (2019) have studied migrants who idealise their potential lives in a different place – Finland seen through the eyes of Iraqi asylum-seekers and potential Bulgarian migrants’ imaginings of life in the UK. Each of these studies demonstrates that an envisaged future in a person’s mind can be the wellspring for action in the real world.

Krivosos and Näre (2019), looking at the initial stages of a planned move abroad, stress the role of imagination in the decision to migrate, creating the desire to be in a particular place. This impetus can be experienced at the level of an individual or family unit or as a part of ‘collective imaginings’ (Adams 2004; Vigh 2009) where a better way of life in one specific destination is envisaged by multiple people from one region. Closer to the setting for my research, the Brexit phenomenon and how it relates to freedom of movement has been looked at from an imagination perspective by Sredanovic (2020): EU27 citizens living in the UK imagine their future post-Brexit and consider potential future mobilities as a result of it; this also applies to the flipside – British citizens living in Belgium fear what a post-Brexit future holds for them if they wish to continue residing in the EU.

The UK scenario was indeed bewildering and upsetting for those EU citizens who, for many years, had felt a strong and developing identification with and belonging to the UK – a sense of ‘differentiated embeddedness’ (Ryan 2017). Zontini and Però (2020) have documented the emotional stress and anxiety that families experienced during this period and which made EU citizens question and change their emplacement practices. This rude awakening in the minds of EU citizens in the UK was especially concerning for the sake of their children, particularly the impact that their children’s ‘foreign’ status could have. EU citizens had to decide whether settled status and permanent life in the UK are what the families ultimately desire. Families with EU citizenship were thus spurred to re-imagine their future.

Among these are families from Latvia who were forced to weigh up their post-Brexit life in the UK, deciding whether it is a long-term or a temporary project. Another, more recent, source of anxiety for migrants globally, including those from Latvia, which led to imagined scenarios of return, is Covid-19 and the unpredictability caused by restrictions to travel, job losses and financial instability. One survey of Latvian nationals living in the UK revealed that the uncertainty caused by Brexit is more worrying to them than the consequences caused by Covid-19 (Kaprans 2020). However, such surveys are very dependent on the moment

at which they were taken and, as the pandemic progressed through 2021, as well as the unfolding impact of Brexit, results of a similar survey taken one year later could be quite different.

Tying this in with the topic of this article, scholars are now looking not only at purely economic (for example, caused by the financial crisis or Covid-19) or geopolitical (as in the case of Brexit) explanations for the motivation for people to uproot their lives. A significant role in the process can be attributed to the perception of a collectively seen better future elsewhere. This can also include the idea that the country of origin may be considered a viable alternative. Imagined alternative realities can relieve the angst of living in a certain place or, alternatively, returning to a prior place. Bolognani (2007: 65), referring to returning British Pakistanis in the UK who see Pakistan as a desirable future place of residence, reasons that:

...[the] imaginary homeland is the antidote to frustration: if things are not good here [in Britain] for younger transnationals, they need to believe that elsewhere there is a place where working towards personal well-being is possible.

Yet there can also be either perceived or actual angst on arrival, whether it be because it is an unfamiliar place or even a previously known territory where the person once lived.

The perceptual aspect of return – which is subjective and dependent on an individual's imagined idea of what awaits them at the other end – is often founded on a gut feeling, the return stories of acquaintances, media reports and even hearsay. These opinions are influential and can have a profound impact on potential movers – for instance, advice from a close friend to remain in the host country (or, alternatively, to move immediately) or sensationalised news reports on a website or in the social media in the home country can conjure up all types of scenarios in a person's mind.

However, the image of the homeland that emerges over time, even filtering into the consciousness of the migrant second generation, can lead to unrealistic perceptions. Harper (2005: 3) suggests that '[e]migrants in all generations tended to construct and freeze their own chosen image of the homeland as they left, an image which becomes more indelible and unalterable as time went on'. Yet an image of the homeland based on memories of a previous generation can be misleading and lead to disappointment and culture shock if life in the homeland has changed considerably in the meantime.

Taking a more pragmatic look at return, Cassarino (2008) outlines factors that shape the reintegration of migrants in the home country – the context of reintegration, optimal duration and type of migration experience and motivating factors for return. Cassarino (2004: 271) argues that there are certain conditions for a return to be a success. Resource mobilisation and preparedness are two aspects that can ensure that returnees experience reduced culture shock. The tangible and intangible resources associated with resource mobilisation (financial capital, skills, connections and social capital) could be in the form of savings accumulated whilst abroad, acquaintances and contacts (in both the host and the home country) who can be drawn on for assistance as well as the knowledge and skills that have been acquired while living abroad.

Preparedness comprises both a willingness and a readiness to return, forming a frame for the real and practical side of return (Cassarino 2008: 101). A returnee's preparedness is also dependent on his or her perception that significant changes have occurred back home – these could be institutional, economic or political changes that have made the country of origin appealing once again. The reintegration process on return, however, leads to a 'rediscovery of [the] real characteristics of the origin country' (Cassarino 2004: 273) which require adaptation and a renegotiation of the terms of living there. Cassarino goes on to argue that 'the higher the level of preparedness, the greater the ability of returnees to mobilise resources autonomously and the stronger their contribution to development' (2004: 275).

In the case of children and their adaptation to life in the homeland of their parent(s), this is dependent on the preparedness and resource mobilisation of adults on their behalf. In other words, the level of preparedness of the child is dependent on the efforts made by adults – for instance, to maintain their child’s native-language skills, acquaint the child with the future environment via return visits and create a feeling in the child that s/he will be heard and supported by the parents as they negotiate their new surroundings.

This study fills a knowledge gap with its focus specifically on the *perception* of return, looking at empirical evidence of self-reports of how a return to the homeland is envisaged by Latvian nationals living abroad, compared with the *reality* of return – given by the views of compatriots who have already moved and experienced the practicalities and emotions associated with a return. The study specifically concerns family return and, in particular, the effect that return has on children. By also drawing on interviews with the children themselves, adding to parent-proxy reports, in-depth insights are gained into the return-migration situation.

Methodology and fieldwork

This research was conducted under the auspices of a state-commissioned large-scale study carried out by the University of Latvia which assesses the lives and wellbeing of Latvian nationals who have emigrated abroad as well as returning nationals. A quantitative online survey conducted in 2019 and disseminated in the diaspora and within Latvia via various online channels, received responses from 7,700 *émigrés*, including 2,477 returnees (Mieriņa, Hazans, Goldmanis, Koroļeva, Reine, Aleksandrovs and Grosa 2020a). Questions in the survey included those specific to migrants with families regarding the perceived problems of return (for emigrants) and actual problems on return (for returnees). The research also had a qualitative component.

Independently I conducted a total of 67 semi-structured interviews with Latvian *émigrés*, as well as returnees – either individually or in small family-based focus groups. Both parents and children from 39 families – 22 emigrants and 17 return-migrant families – were interviewed. Most often the family member interviewed was the mother (although there were some fathers interviewed), as mothers were more responsive to the invitation to take part in the study and open to discussing their family’s experiences. When interviewing children, ethical safeguards were strictly adhered to, with care and discretion exercised during interviewing, veering away from topics that might cause distress. All participants were given pseudonyms. Most of the research evidence presented here comes from these interviews, supplemented by selected data from the questionnaire survey.

Interviewees were living in or had returned from various host countries in the European Union (primarily the UK – still part of the EU at that time – Ireland and Germany) and Norway (an EEA country, where EU nationals may work on the same footing as in other EU member states) as well as from countries further afield – the USA, Canada, Australia and elsewhere. Participants were recruited via various methods – answering an invitation to take part in the study in co-ethnic Facebook groups in Germany and the UK, responding to an invitation in Latvian ethnic-language schools in Germany and the UK, personal invitations to participants known to the author, as well as recruitment via the snowball technique (whereby one interviewee recommends another for interviewing). The interviewees came from different socio-economic groups, with a range of educational backgrounds. The children were aged between 8 and 18 and both sexes were interviewed. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and also via Skype or Zoom. They were recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo thematic coding.

Among the questions put to interviewees living abroad were topics concerning the Latvian language proficiency of the children, the possibility of return and the foreseeable challenges which their children may face, while returnees were questioned about the ease of adaptation which the families experienced on return. The two main research questions for the study were:

- How does an imagined family return to the homeland differ from the lived experience?
- What factors lessen the impact of return?

This is not a longitudinal study and the experiences of specific families are not compared pre- and post-return. Instead, the perceived difficulties that would accompany a return outlined by families who are currently living abroad were compared to the current experiences of recent returnees.

The next section concerns Latvian nationals currently living abroad and their imaginaries and perceptions of return – from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. This is followed by the narratives of returnees, sharing the return stories of their families, including the views and experiences of some returnee children. The last part outlines the factors, when preparing for return, that can mitigate anxiety.

Migrants living in the host country

For migrants who have made a decision to move, with young children, to a new country, one of the reasons for such a move is based on the perception that the children's future prospects will be much improved. So, for Ritma the mother of twin primary-school-age boys who moved to the UK in 2018, justification for the decision was articulated in one simple sentence: 'If they [the boys] completed their schooling in Latvia, then their career prospects would be – as manager at *Rimi* [a supermarket chain in Latvia]'. In Ritma's view, a supermarket manager does not amount to much in career terms and education in the UK school system offers more opportunities for her sons. This echoes research on the educational aspirations of immigrants, which is dependent on social background and influences educational careers with educational choices linked to the high level of optimism and motivation for upward mobility by immigrants (Astleithner, Vogl and Parzer 2021; Tjaden and Hunkler 2017). Basit (2012) labels this 'aspirational capital' and notes that high levels of this form of capital can compensate for low parental socio-economic status – a finding confirmed by a recent study of the experiences of the children of Latin American parents in Britain conducted during the Covid period (Klitzsch 2021).

Some participants had taken their imagination back to their childhood. They had the view that, as the education system in Latvia had not changed significantly since their early years, they did not want their children subject to it. The post-Soviet education system still entails many elements of the conservative approach that existed 30+ years ago – in terms of discipline, teacher–student relationships, curricula, assessment and attitudes towards diversity. Whether this is the case in every school in Latvia is debatable (private schools most certainly have a different approach) but the perception of migrants is that there has been little change. The parents of Polish returnees studied by Szydlowska, Durlik and Grzymala-Moszczynska (2019) were similarly critical of methods used by teachers in Polish schools (also previously under the Soviet sphere of influence), highlighting instruction methods described as 'archaic, schematic and destroying the natural curiosity and creativity of children' (2019: 184).

This view is also illustrated by Lidiya, who lives in Germany. She admits that she would not consider returning to Latvia for her two young children as she does not want them to be in the system in which she was raised. Her opinion was even stronger than that of Ritma – Lidiya said that she wants her children to open their eyes to the world and not squander their lives or waste time unnecessarily, which would happen if they returned to Latvia. Such a perception is based on her own rather negative experience of a brief return (prior to having children) where she felt that the higher education which she had obtained abroad was being wasted in a job in her profession in Latvia.

Oskars, who lives in the UK, also made an attempt to test out return by enrolling his son in a prestigious school in Riga in Grade 1 for one school year. The experiment – as he calls it – was not successful and the boy came back to the UK after one semester: 'There were problems. The problem was that (...) teachers couldn't cope with the class, there was bullying (...) and the school didn't really get involved in solving it...'. This lack of interest by teachers in resolving the bullying directed towards his son was an eye-opener that gave his

imagined return a bitter taste. A negative experience in one school in the country of origin can mar the dream of return for good. Oskars has not been considering return since that incident, citing stability for his family as paramount as his three sons get older and enter secondary school. The bullying of school-age returnees has also been spotlighted in the return-migrant literature, where teasing and pranks directed at children in schools have been found to be rife (Vathi and Duci 2016; Vathi and King 2021).

Other perceived challenges were outlined by participants in the questionnaire-survey responses. Although the most frequent answers for them not returning to Latvia were ‘I have settled here (in the host country) for life’ and ‘I am disappointed in Latvia’, other frequently mentioned answers included ‘I am not sure if my child will receive the required support to integrate into the Latvian education system’ and ‘I don’t see opportunities for growth for my children in Latvia’, as well as ‘a lack of Latvian language proficiency’ (their own or that of their spouse or children). Based on these perceived outcomes (and other reasons), a move back is not considered by many to be an option. Digging a bit deeper, 30 per cent of all survey participants living abroad felt that their children would find it difficult or very difficult to adapt to school or pre-school in Latvia and the reasons given for this were varied (see Table 1).

Table 1. Challenges which emigrant children would face in the pre-school/school system in Latvia, according to parents (data in %, n = 2477)

Challenges perceived by parents	%
Children’s proficiency in the Latvian language	73
Different approach to teaching in schools	59
Attitude of teachers	46
Attitude of classmates to newcomers	41
Curriculum differences (not harmonised)	35
A lack of support for psychological preparedness and resilience	21
Nothing would hinder the children’s adaptation	6

Yet there are migrants – and their children – who see themselves returning to Latvia once they have completed their education. Fifteen-year-old Sofija, who has been living in Germany for 10 years, wants to live in Latvia after she has finished school. Her reasoning: she gets fed up with Germany, with so many people around. Renāte, a Latvian teenager living in Switzerland with her family, wants to complete university studies in Europe and, after that, once she has a good grasp of her profession, would like to move to Latvia and start up a business there. Gaining a good education abroad and learning foreign languages are of high priority for many migrants. This falls in line with Wessendorf’s (2007) findings on ‘roots migration’ where second-generation ‘returnees’ completed their schooling and studies in Switzerland, yet chose to return to Italy in their 30s because of their strong sense of belonging to their ethnic homeland as a place that is both real and imagined.

Returnee family experiences

Survey responses from returnee families indicate a rosier view of return than that articulated by most of the emigrants. Table 2 shows the responses of returned parents regarding their children’s experiences on return. This substantially correlates with previous research that has shown that a lack of Latvian language skills will more likely cause difficulties in adapting to life in Latvia for adults and especially for children (Hazans 2016; Mieriņa, Koroļeva, Jansone and Grosa 2020b). An overall 53 per cent of participants in the survey study replied that integration into the school pre-school system was either very easy or easy and only 8 per cent indicated

that it was difficult or very difficult. Such a contrast between the views of migrants and returnees (compare the survey results in Tables 1 and 2) regarding the perceived and actual challenges experienced shows that the perception of future events seems to be bleaker than they actually turn out to be.

Table 2. Challenges which returnee children faced in the pre-school/school system in Latvia, as perceived by their parents (% data, n = 351)

Challenges perceived by parents	%
Nothing hindered the children's adaptation	41
Children's proficiency in the Latvian language	26
Attitude of Latvian teachers to newcomers	26
Curriculum differences	16
Attitude of classmates to newcomers	13
A lack of support for psychological preparedness and resilience	11

There could also be an element of self-justification in these responses. If a person does not wish to return, then the reasons for staying put in the host country will be more enhanced and the perception of the children's integration challenges can be one of the many justifying factors. For those who have returned and experienced the situation first-hand, the feeling is more positive, arguably because returnees may have a different mindset – full of hope and trust that return will be successful. However, the fact that returnees have committed themselves to the return might also make them want to justify that decision and to play down problems experienced by themselves and their children. For this reason, returnees do not generally express many regrets about their return – at least not initially. The decision-making and return process, possibly long and cumbersome, with a long period of preparation for some, is often taken with eyes wide open. For others, however, decisions are made spontaneously and based on a gut feeling. Regardless of how long the preparation took or whether resource mobilisation (as outlined by Cassarino 2004) was made use of, the imagined return can be successful for a variety of reasons. For parents, making a joint decision and relocating the whole family is no small task, yet a single-minded, unwavering and positive attitude on the part of the parents can also influence the children and make the move more eagerly anticipated.

Vanda, who had been living in France for 18 years, had always dreamed of returning to Latvia. Her French husband and two teenage children, both born in France, shared her dream of moving to Vanda's homeland. They fulfilled this dream and made the move to provincial Latvia, having found and purchased their 'dream home' in the woods. Everyone seemed to initially enjoy life in their new environment, yet Vanda tells us:

Each of us had created our dream world that we wanted to live in. My husband wanted me to be happy and he knew I wanted to return to Latvia... From the outset we held the thought that nothing is set in stone and if it doesn't work out we can always return [i.e. go back to France]. But at the same time, we did everything with the mindset that [the move] is forever... In our case it was more about where our roots are... One person will adapt and the other person will say 'No I can't adapt'.

There is an interesting dichotomy here in Vanda's mindset – the move was meant to be forever yet, according to her, was 'not set in stone'. The reasoning behind such contrasting statements would need deeper probing as it appears that there was some confusion about the permanence of this move. Each family and each family member processes mobility differently and makes decisions and expresses opinions based on different criteria. Ease of mobility is one factor (if the family can uproot themselves quickly because of a transnational lifestyle),

as is the way in which each family member adapts to the new environment and the empathy within the family towards each individual family member's success at integration.

In Vanda's case, the family ended up returning to France. Vanda agonised over the 'double return' migration (White 2014) as she saw that only some members of her family were happy. She initiated a family meeting and the new joint family decision was to 're-return'. However, Vanda admitted that she would advise anyone considering return to the homeland to do so and not to hesitate:

If you want to return to Latvia, then return. The worst that can happen would be that you return to where you came from [the host country] (...) the only thing you can lose is money. The rest is an experience that you will only gain from.

By rationalising a return or a re-migration following return in this way, Vanda takes away the disappointment of an unsuccessful return by putting it down to 'experience', which could be seen to be a rather nonchalant way of downplaying any anxiety caused by uprooting those family members involved in the process. Similar back-and-forth situations have been documented by Bermudez and Paraschivescu (2021) when researching the return of Romanian families to Romania who then subsequently re-migrated to France for emotional and financial reasons. White (2014) also wrote on Polish migrants in Britain returning to Poland, finding that they could not settle there and then moving back to Britain to pick up their lives.

Sarma, who lived in the UK for seven years with her partner and two primary-school-aged children and worked in hospitality, aimed to save money for their own home back in Latvia. She presented the idea of return to her children by putting a positive spin on it:

...we gave them the positives – that, in time, we would get a bigger house (...) as over there [in England] (...) they were in one bedroom (...) that we could get a cat and a dog. That's how we motivated them (...) that their cousin would be nearby. We told them a while back that we were planning this.

Parents who point out the positives of a move can make the imagined return more palatable to their children. Without this, it is difficult to convince them of the benefits of moving away from friends and a life that is familiar and dear to them. Sarma's children adapted quite well to their new environment in Latvia, despite a realisation that they would no longer see their friends in England and the initial handicap of a lack of Latvian language proficiency. Puplauskaitė (2021), researching Lithuanian returnees from Norway (the Lithuanian situation with regard to migration being very much like that of Latvia), evidenced a similar situation: despite Lithuanian children in Norway maintaining their native language, they faced difficulties with the language on entering school in Lithuania and were required to work additionally on their language skills as well as having to adapt to the new education system.

Even if there is an element of seeing the parental homeland through 'rose-coloured spectacles' before moving, these can come off fairly soon after arrival. This was put very emotionally by Vilis, who remembers his move to Latvia from Australia 12 years ago, aged six:

Maybe I don't have memories of that time but, in actual fact, I think I didn't even know what that meant – to move... I didn't know that my friendships with classmates would come to an end, that my life would change its course by 180 degrees (...) to me it seemed like one big adventure... I had this fantasy Latvia in my mind. I'm heading there but there is a difference between what is in your mind and what the reality is.

This poignant illustration of how a child feels on ‘return’ (in Vilis’ case, it was a new move, as he was born in Australia) highlights the dissonance between the imagined and the real. Vilis’ admission that the veil of fantasy lifted clearly states that even a young child can feel the impact of a physical relocation, challenging the notion that young age can be a protective factor for migrant children (Gervais, Côté, Pomerleau, Tardif-Grenier, de Montigny and Trottier-Cyr 2021) and identifying it as a risk factor (Patterson 2012). So what factors can mitigate the anxiety of changed circumstances for an immigrant family, even if they cannot eliminate the stress completely?

Mitigating factors to reduce the angst of return

Cassarino (2004, 2008), outlining the conditions and timing for a successful return, stresses the importance of return readiness and preparedness. One of the ways in which the fantasy element of a return can be mitigated is with frequent trips to the homeland. Many Latvian nationals living abroad (most commonly in countries in Europe) travel to visit family and friends during their summer holidays. This provides regular physical contact (still a more preferred option to Skype and Zoom calls) with relatives and helps children to familiarise themselves with their parents’ homeland, so it is not a mythical, unknown place and the children gain specific points of reference.

Another mitigating factor is learning and maintaining the language of the country of origin – in this case, Latvian (or, for some returning nationals, Russian, if the family is of Russian origin). If the language is spoken at home or enhanced either at a weekend language school or via distance education, then the children’s integration can be smoother (Grosa 2020; Mieriņa *et al.* 2020b; Puplauskaitė 2021). It does not remove all obstacles, as the home language spoken while living abroad is often less rich and lacking in vocabulary and is most likely not of the standard expected at school in Latvia. Likewise, attending cultural performances and traditional Latvian customary events put on by diaspora organisations while living abroad also familiarises children with the culture of the home country and can ease integration, albeit these events are not sufficient on their own to prepare children for the move to Latvia. Diaspora summer camps are another way in which children living in the diaspora can maintain their language and culture.

Preparation can take other forms. It can involve giving children a chance to say a proper goodbye to their classmates and friends in the host country and encouraging contact with them via social networks – which will probably lessen as time goes by. Pollock and van Reken (2009) discuss the grief cycle with regard to ‘third-culture kids’ (children living in a country the culture of which is not their ethnic or customary culture) and relocation, a stage that may be applicable to any child who moves from one country to another. Continued contact with the previous life is seen to be important for primary and high-school children who, after moving, will naturally still want to cling to the diminishing fantasy of the life that still continues in the previous country of residence.

Seventeen-year-old Pauls returned to Latvia after living in the USA for five years. This last return to Latvia was more uprooting than previous ones, although he is not a novice at moving as his family relocated a number of times in his childhood. Pauls shares:

This time it was a bit different as (...) well, I do write to my friends but I haven’t met any of them since I left and most likely over the next few years I won’t meet them, only if they come to Europe (...) so this time for me, purely from a psychological point of view, this was the most complicated time, because I was there for five years (...) and they were also the years where I matured the most, which means I established ties with people which I had never done previously and that’s why I think the last time was the hardest...

No amount of readiness and preparation for the imagined new life back in Latvia can mitigate the grief associated with disrupted friendships. Staying in contact was possible for Pauls via social media and other platforms but the face-to-face friendships being cut short was a fact of life he faced because of the move. A mitigating factor in Pauls' case was keeping himself busy and throwing himself into the array of after-school activities which were available to him in Latvia, almost all free of charge.

A positive attitude towards the move by the parents themselves can also be a contributing factor in the success or disappointment of a return, especially for the children. Frequent comparison with the host country and denigration of the country of origin can psychologically influence both parent and child. This is how Kristīne, a recent returnee from a large city in Norway, relays the positives of a new life in Latvia to her primary-school-aged son, who is currently adapting to life in a large town in northern Latvia. Like Pauls, he is also being kept busy with many after-school activities:

In M. [a regional town] there is a very wide variety of after-school activities and they cost nothing. He [Kristīne's son] will attend the digital centre, three different activities and they cost nothing. He has also started rowing training (...) we have a river near M., we have the sea, we have a lake, the forest. Everything is 10 minutes away. And that is what my son really, really likes. He has expressed his feelings: 'And now I have a home'. And maybe for him, too, a home is a house not an apartment.

Kristīne and her son did experience challenges negotiating the Latvian school system and the return was fraught with dramatic twists and turns yet, in Kristīne's mind, the positives of the return – outside the school environment – outweigh the negatives. Her son is also more settled with extended family around him and the dream of a less-complicated life back in the homeland can be lived if a person sees the benefits of the 'bigger picture'.

Seeing the positives was also evident in Samanta's account of her family's recent return after living in a country in sub-Saharan Africa. Samanta, her African husband and their children spent part of the year of the Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia and the return was for family reasons. This move was considered to be a temporary one, as Samanta admits she is just as happy in her home in Africa as an 'expat' as she is in the small country town in Latvia in which they currently reside. She must now decide what to do in the long term – whether the family will remain in Latvia is still uncertain. The positives, despite living amidst restrictions imposed by the pandemic, are that her 10-year-old daughter can move about freely in Latvia – go to the shops by herself and meet up with her friends, something that was not so simple back in Africa. Samanta, however, admits that she finds it difficult to adapt, having spent almost half of her life abroad. She shares that:

Latvia to me, having spent 21 years abroad, had become an idealised Latvia. All the bad things are forgotten and only the good is remembered and I lived in this bubble, despite the fact that every year I visited Latvia and met my girlfriends... Now that I have returned (...) it's not the same (...) you can't just go back into the previous life. I have the feeling that I have to start afresh.

This illustrates the uncertainty and frustration of the returning parents themselves, not just the children. Yet Samanta remains hopeful and is positive about the assistance her daughter received when settling into school. The return was planned a few months beforehand, the school was already lined up and their daughter speaks Latvian, making return easier – so preparation (as outlined by Cassarino 2004) was certainly evident in this situation.

Support measures by home-country institutions

Preparation and resource mobilisation on the part of migrants are helpful; also crucial are support measures in the education system of the country of origin. Latvia has put in place support measures such as additional individual language and subject lessons for 1–2 years if required, teaching assistants in the classroom – available with additional funding from municipal council funds – and individual lesson plans. The findings of the 2019 survey show that the capacity-building of teachers is one important aspect – being able to empathise with newcomers, welcome them and include them in the class cohort. Around 30 per cent of survey participants who were returnees reported that teachers/educators in Latvia are very empathetic to the needs of returnee children (compared with 60 per cent among those living abroad, replying about teachers in the host country). Adapting the curriculum to cater for different levels of language proficiency and knowledge in various subjects, making allowances for students in their first few months and not grading them initially according to the assessment criteria used for other students are all suggestions made by parents in open-ended answers in the survey.

Other support measures that the Latvian government has implemented are an online handbook issued by the Latvian Language Agency which provides advice to returning parents and to those who teach returnee children (LVA 2021a, b). Ongoing professional development classes for teachers of return-migrant pupils in government schools, as well as online language classes that maintain children's Latvian language skills in the diaspora, are run by the same agency (Krastiņa and Zariņa 2021). Another recent Latvian government initiative – the employment of return-migration coordinators – has been a great support to returnees and to families in particular. These civil servants – one in each of five regions in Latvia – help returnees to find a job or start up a business, source pre-schools and schools for the children and organise social-security benefits. Their assistance has been much appreciated by returnees (Prusakova, Bērziņš and Apsīte-Beriņa 2021). Information/socialisation camps for returnees are also run by the Latvian Language Agency and these have been rated positively by families who have taken part. The Latvian language can also be maintained in over 100 Latvian diaspora schools worldwide as well as in summer camps organised for Latvian children living abroad with Latvian government and diaspora community funding.

All these support measures can be seen as a form of preparation for return, both on the part of the returning families themselves and as assistance from the Latvian government. Resource mobilisation in the form of advice and assistance from transnational friendships – advice from friends who are recent returnees and from relatives living back home – can also help. Yet no amount of preparation can make a person fully ready – imagination can be the catalyst and provide a mental image of what could take place, holiday visits can familiarise the person with the country and native-language skills can be seen as capital; however, the reality of moving will always be an individual experience for each family and for its constituent members.

Conclusion

Return to the homeland with second-generation children can be daunting and the cause of worry and anxiety. The imagining of a much-improved life back home can be a catalyst for mobility but a smooth integration is not guaranteed. Yet there can be mitigating factors to lessen the angst associated with return. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data have shown that the perceived challenges may appear greater in the imagination than they turn out to be in reality. The imagined challenges of a return to the homeland for their children voiced by parents in the diaspora, when compared with the opinion of actual returnees, show that the primary anxiety – that a lack of native-language proficiency would hinder children's adaptation into school life – is largely unfounded. Nevertheless, my study does show that some areas of school life for returnees are

problematic – a curriculum unharmonised with those of other countries, a lack of empathy on the part of teachers and a sometimes hostile attitude on the part of classmates are all still challenging. Yet the survey findings of returnees have shown an overall positive opinion of return regarding the integration of their children.

Cassarino's (2004, 2008) framework of return preparedness, willingness and readiness, coupled with resource mobilisation, seems to ring true for many of the interviewees in the qualitative part of this study. Those families where children had maintained their native language skills, had frequently visited Latvia, had been informed about the move in a timely manner and were prepared for the move by their parents with a positive mindset, found it easier to acclimatise to their new surroundings.

Return anxieties can be further mitigated by a welcoming attitude in the home country – not only by the relatives (grandparents, cousins, uncles, aunts) but also by the state and its institutions (schools, after-school activities, return-migration coordinators). School support measures, including teachers who show empathy for children who are entering a system that is unfamiliar to them and classmates who welcome rather than bully newcomers, are all ideals to strive for. Progress has been made with some support measures in welcoming new families back (e.g. return-migrant camps, a handbook for returnee parents and those who teach returnee children) yet there is still more to be done to make returnee children feel completely welcome and fully understood – from both an academic and a social perspective.

Some additional recommendations for support measures are greater opportunities for potential returnees to find out about the school system from school representatives in Latvia (either teaching staff, returnee parents or even returnee school-aged children). Summer camps for potential returnee families to meet recent returnees and schoolteachers can be another helpful activity to ease anxiety. Websites for returnees, answering frequently asked questions, as well as more online forum platforms for potential returnees could help to put people's minds at rest, particularly concerning school entry in Latvia. Currently there is one Facebook forum for returnee families which has helped people to resolve some issues but these websites and social-media platforms are also needed at the school and municipal government levels, offering advice to people seeking information regarding return.


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