

## 8. Mobile young individuals: subjective experiences of migration and return

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Migration has been one of the distinctive features of the recent phase of youth employment in Europe (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Exacerbated levels of youth unemployment have led to greater attention being paid to the movement of young people within the EU (Burrell, 2011; Glorius et al., 2013; Holtslag et al., 2013) as significant numbers of young people living in countries that are severely affected by the economic crisis have moved abroad to find work. Freedom of movement and residence have been a cornerstone of the EU from the very beginning; indeed, they are enshrined in law: most recently in 2004 in what is known as the Free Movement or the Citizens' Rights Directive 2004/38/EC. Since the EU's Eastern enlargements of 2004 and 2007, several hundred thousand workers have moved from Central and Eastern Europe to Western European countries (Engbersen et al., 2013).

When Europeans move from one place to another, we are typically speaking about short distances within their own nation state or home region. Eurostat figures on geographic mobility show that although 6.4 per cent of the EU-28 population changed their place of residency in the year prior to the census of 2011, only 0.6 per cent crossed borders in doing so (Eurostat, 2017a). For many Europeans, the move is only temporary; that is, an episode early in adult life and not a permanent condition.

To understand the experiences and consequences of migration amongst young adults in Europe, it is not enough to ask: 'how many?' and 'where?'. We also need to unravel the 'why(s)?', as well as what follows after a period of migration. Researchers often focus on objective factors like the difference in availability of jobs in the country left behind and the country to which the young person has migrated. This chapter considers instead how the migrating person thought and felt about taking this step and what

the subjective consequences of doing so were. We address two research questions:

- Why do young Europeans faced with early career insecurity decide to migrate and why do they decide to return?
- What are the subjective consequences of migration and return in the specific context of European youth unemployment?

When young Europeans choose to seek their fortunes elsewhere, there is no guarantee that they will succeed in their goals of finding employment, new friends or experiences, language proficiency or whatever else they envision. Even when they do succeed, it is not a given that they will stay permanently in their new country of residence.

Young people migrate in response to their desire for a better life and so as to escape poverty, unemployment or violence. Some move in order to obtain higher education, to find better-paid work or to get married (Cortina et al., 2014: 10). Push and pull factors interact with each person's particular resources, needs and experiences. The decision to migrate is a complex compromise between the incentive to go, the capacity to go and the perceived costs and benefits. Previous research (e.g., Dustmann and Weiss, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2011) shows the importance of economic variables in migration decisions. These economic variables not only relate to the young person's own financial means, but also to the socioeconomic standing of their family, and the degree to which they are able and willing to support them.

An extensive literature has focused on the role of social networks in relation to migration experiences (Boyd, 1989; Haug, 2008; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). Social connections can provide important financial, emotional or practical support when a person decides to migrate. Family networks may provide so much help with initial accommodation, social contacts and even job opportunities for young migrating individuals that we can call it chain migration. Whilst personality type and individual resources shape much of the way young migrants exercise agency, social contexts like intermediaries, supporters, friends, family and the acquaintances made in the course of migrating are also, in complex ways, important in the often life-changing decision to migrate or not to migrate, to stay or to return (De Bock, 2017).

We must also pay attention to the historical time and place in which the young people live, because every period or era is characterized by different opportunities and constraints. These factors constitute the context in which young people make decisions and exert agency over their life courses (Elder et al., 2003). Thus, we can tie subjective outcomes

of migration to the complex workings of how the individual agency of young people navigates between their own desires and capabilities, their networks and economic and cultural resources, and the context of the boundaries and socioeconomic conditions of states and national regulations. Particular features of the intra-European migration context are relative geographical proximity and the freedom to take up residency and work in other European countries. Thus, two notions that are used in the literature to describe this relatively barrier-free intra-European movement – especially with regard to young people – are ‘easy transnationalism’ and ‘liquid migration’ (Engbersen et al., 2013; King et al., 2017).

Following Wingens et al. (2011: 1), we believe that analysing the interrelations between structurally embedded factors and active agency is a fruitful way to connect the micro, meso and macro levels that are involved when young adults decide to migrate to another country. The environment in which individuals live provides opportunities and resources for action, but also obstacles and constraints. The interaction between human agency and environmental structure creates unique biographies (Crockett, 2002: 8). In this regard, we can interpret the individual action (of migration) as a mechanism mediating between the initial conditions (structure) and the person’s further life course (Dingeldey et al., 2015: 11–12). In this chapter we analyse the narratives of three individuals to illustrate the diverse ways in which individual agency and structural conditions can interact to shape a person’s subsequent life (Wingens et al., 2011: 6). The overview we obtain through statistics on youth migration is rich and extensive (Akgüç and Beblavý, forthcoming; Eurostat, 2017b; Kahanec and Fabo, 2013; Van Mol, 2016). However, these statistics tell us little about the motivations and subjective experiences of the young migrants (Hyggen et al., 2017). As a backdrop for the analysis, we draw on the NEGOTIATE project’s more than 200 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The major advantage of such qualitative data is that they allow a nuanced picture to be drawn of the multiple motives and relative importance of different factors from the (subjective) perspective of the young migrant (King et al., 2017).

We have chosen three life-course narratives that address migration experiences. These young adults were born in Bulgaria, Norway and the United Kingdom, and they have only a few basic things in common: they were all born in the 1970s, they migrated to another European country and they did not stay abroad. Only one of these three migration experiences took place within a regulated labour migration system. By focusing on the narratives of lived experience, we investigate how people themselves assess the consequences of migration at a young age. Analysing migration within the framework of a life-course approach allows us to explore the complex

interplay of societal structuring forces and the agency of individuals over time (Wingens et al., 2011: 6), revealing the consequences of actions by young people who are seeking to convert their available resources into a better life.

## 2 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Our analysis uses semi-structured, qualitative life-course data featuring episodes of migration and collected within the framework of the NEGOTIATE project (for a more detailed description of the method, see Hvinden et al., Chapter 1 this volume). In the first instance, we made a sweep of all the interview summaries so as to highlight which could illustrate the diverse ways in which a person's agency and environmental structures can interact in shaping a migrant's further life course. One might describe the interviews we chose as a convenience sample (Bryman, 2008: 201). We selected three particularly interesting cases from three countries: United Kingdom, Norway and Bulgaria. All three cases were born in the 1970s and had been unemployed in their 20s, living in quite diverse economic, societal and institutional contexts in which they exercised agency and made decisions about their own lives. The three interviewees had recounted three quite diverse experiences of migration and reasons for returning to their homeland, and all three were available for re-interview. After the authors had discussed the selection of these three respondents, we prepared a common guideline for the second interviews. We believed re-interviewing to be necessary to allow us to focus specifically on their story of migration; why and how it happened, what it was like, why they returned, and the subjective short- and long-term consequences. We interviewed all three in their first language in their country of origin and asked a series of questions in a semi-structured format.

We transcribed the interviews in full and then scripted summaries in English using citations from the transcripts. This process is a layered approach to narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a balance between the interviewee and the researcher in that we as researchers assist in the creation of the narrative from the stories the interviewees tell us (Holstein and Gubrium, 2012). When summarizing, we strove to maintain the essence of the participants' narrated experience. In this chapter we have retold this experience in a shortened but true format, presented below with additional comments. All three researchers analysed the summaries further to examine if common themes and threads were present, especially with regard to the key turning points in the migration experience: deciding to go and

deciding to return. This extended the narrative analysis across the cases and countries, and it allowed us to go beyond the boundaries of individual cases and countries. The cases and the stories they convey cannot claim to be representative, but they are nonetheless valid and reliable narratives.

In the following pages, we will delve into the three stories one after the other. We will first contextualize the story and then focus on decision-making, subjectively felt well-being and the reasons for return. In conclusion, we will discuss the aspects that these young returned migrants share, how they differ, and what lessons researchers and policymakers can draw from their stories.

### 3 KALINA'S STORY: FROM BULGARIA TO GREECE

Before 1989 Bulgarians were not free to travel abroad. After the collapse of the communist regime, Bulgaria became a country of migration (Guentcheva et al., 2004). The main push factors were economic: high levels of unemployment, low income and poverty (Petrunov, 2014). Higher wages and more work opportunities abroad were the main pull factors. A recent study (Stoilova and Dimitrova, 2017) shows that low-qualified Bulgarians earn higher wages for the same work in Western Europe. Thus, they have little incentive to enhance their education and qualifications and improve their labour market chances in Bulgaria. Instead, in the case of seasonal workers, on returning to Bulgaria, they look for the next work opportunity abroad.

This is the case of Kalina, who has been employed as a seasonal worker in Greece since she was 16. Unofficial data from the Greek police for 2015 suggest that approximately 200 000 Bulgarians live in Greece, consisting of 120 000 permanent residents and 50 000 to 80 000 seasonal workers (Dimitrova, 2015).

Kalina was born at the beginning of the 1970s in a large city in south-eastern Bulgaria. She belongs to the Greek-speaking ethnic community of the Sarakatsani. The Sarakatsani were originally a nomadic people, and one may argue that this tradition lives on in their modern seasonal migrations southwards to Greece. Kalina started taking summer jobs abroad in the beginning of the 1990s while she was still in high school, when she would accompany her parents going to Greece to seek work. At the start of her migration, Kalina and her family received financial aid from the Sarakatsani Association. Her family's decision to work abroad did not provoke any comment from her social circle. Kalina made it clear that this was something normal for many Bulgarians and therefore not worthy of comment.

At first, Kalina and her parents worked in agriculture, in the fields. They would go from village to village and stay where they happened to find work:

We did all sorts of things, I've picked tomatoes, I've also worked in a factory, without insurance of course, nobody considers your rights, at minimum wage, and all sorts of work. . .

The work was not easy:

Because of the temperatures in Greece, you get up very early in the morning. At times we would get up at five to go to the fields. You work at least until noon. After that, there is a rest period. And after that. . .in the evening, if there happens to be some work to finish up.

Despite this, she has no complaints, because the pay was good, unlike in Bulgaria, and she points out that one day's wage in Greece is as much as half a month's salary in Bulgaria. This made it possible for Kalina, even in the initial years, to save far more money than her peers who remained in Bulgaria.

After graduating with a secondary degree from a foreign-language high school, she spoke both German and English, in addition to her family language – (a version of) Greek. She started work as a waitress in a seaside resort at the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, but she only worked there for ten days and then quit because the pay was lower than what she had earned in Greece.

Kalina's greatest motivation for going abroad to look for a job was financial – to seek better employment and a higher income in a country with a higher standard of living. This corresponds to the findings of several other studies (Markova, 2004) that point to the importance of economic factors (not only higher wages but also the lower costs of migration to a neighbouring country) in the decision-making process of migrants.

Kalina spent many summers working in Greece and, because of her origin and her knowledge of Greek, she was very well accepted and felt at home: 'They looked on me as one of their girls.' This was one reason why she considered remaining there. However, she did not stay because during one of her returns to Bulgaria, she met the man who would become her husband. The only time she did not work in Greece in the summer was when she stayed in Bulgaria to care for her young daughter. Her entire work experience in Greece consisted of jobs without a signed work contract.

Regarding the short-term effects of her experience abroad, Kalina recalls that it gave her the possibility to buy things she could not buy in

Bulgaria – first, because during the years of transition those items were not to be found in Bulgarian stores and, second, because she had more money than her peers. Her working abroad led to reduced social contacts in Bulgaria. As for the long-term effect of migration, Kalina points out that she has not been able to acquire the work habits of a permanent job:

...in my case, what happens is that I work temporarily somewhere, you know, and after a few months of work in Greece, I can live carefree. I don't have the habit, you know, the work habits of working at a steady job. This is what has influenced my way of life and ultimately my way of work.

In fact, Kalina has never held on to a full-time job with fixed working hours and rest days on Saturday and Sunday. She perceives this as rather negative; she admits she has received offers for well-paid jobs in Bulgaria, but she has not accepted them because she would have to get up in the morning, go to work and go home – every day: 'I have some kind of fear of this, almost'.

Another effect of her working abroad, and mostly in the grey sector, is that she has no social insurance – no health or retirement insurance. However, she does not perceive this as a negative result of her work, because she believes everyone can insure himself/herself through a private pension plan in Bulgaria, if he or she wants to. But she does not do this because she believes the amount she would pay for insurance would greatly exceed what she would eventually receive back as a pension. This indicates that she does not rely on the state, neither now nor for her future:

Although, if I open an account [in a bank], after a while, there would be more money accumulated than if I were to wait for a pension (laughs).

Another result of her working abroad is that Kalina now has higher demands regarding salary – demands that she cannot fulfil in Bulgaria with her education and qualification level. Her whole work experience relates to foreign countries, and she is not considering work in Bulgaria:

...given that the money I get there in a week, here I would have to work a month to earn it.

Another salient point in Kalina's story is that long periods of working at different temporary jobs have formed a spirit of adventure in the respondent. As she says:

With me, the aspect of nostalgia for the native land is missing. I quickly adapt to any environment.

Temporary employment in grey-sector jobs had been, at the start of her professional career, a source of income and a chance to meet new and interesting people. However, at this point, these jobs have led to de-qualification and forced her to look for work that is below her education and skill level:

Yes, that's the nasty thing, that there is no contract. I suppose there are jobs with a contract, but very few jobs have both a contract and social security. . . . At the moment, I have no real orientation about what I could work at with the knowledge I have. In looking for a job at the moment, I turn to professions like chambermaid at the seaside. . . . which would hardly give me moral satisfaction, not to mention financial gain, in comparison with Greece. But some kind of occupation for me now, to earn pay. . . . just so I don't stay idle now that the child is grown. Chances for a higher education, now, at this age. . . . I repeat, it is hardly the most appropriate period.

It is not possible to define Kalina's story as only positive or only negative. On the one hand, Kalina is very satisfied with the pay she receives at the low-skilled jobs she finds in Greece, and she has positive feelings about her experience abroad. She is well received by the local people, visits various places, meets interesting people, and she even applies her language skills, which gives her satisfaction:

Because these are awesome emotions – you find yourself in a situation with English speakers, German speakers and Greeks, and so I can speak all three languages at the same time and I create a sensation.

Moreover, she sees herself working abroad in the future as well. On the other hand, Kalina has no formal work experience at all and has no social insurance. She does not seem to be able to find a place for herself in Bulgaria – she has not been able to acquire work habits for a permanent job and always has to look for a low-skilled job.

#### 4 JIMMY'S STORY: FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM TO GERMANY

In 1991–92, approximately 155 000 British citizens emigrated. Australia was the top destination for British long-term migrants leaving the United Kingdom (approximately 48 000), followed by the United States as second-most popular destination. Other attractive destinations for British citizens during this period were Germany, Canada and New Zealand (Murray et al., 2012). As mentioned above, economic variables are significant factors for migration decisions. However, informal connections can

also play an important role. One usually calls migration that arises from a social contact who has already migrated and who arranges employment, accommodation and transport, chain migration. We can regard Jimmy's migration as such. He counts as a migrant because his story corresponds with the official definitions: he moved to a country other than his usual residence for a period of one year. However, his journey began with far more uncertainty than this would imply.

Jimmy was born in the early 1970s in the United Kingdom. At age 16, he went to a vocational college and gained qualifications in bricklaying. Up until 1993, he was continuously working. The UK recession began in 1991, and unemployment rose from 7 per cent in 1990 to 10.6 per cent in 1993 (Pettinger, 2013). Recessions often affect the construction industry and the UK recession was no different: house prices fell and there was less demand for building homes. Interest rates rose, and mortgages became less affordable.

In 1993 unemployment in construction began to rise and Jimmy was unable to find a job in this industry or in any other. He was claiming benefits in the form of Jobseekers' Allowance. As Jimmy recalls:

There was no work in England at all. In the recession, construction was completely gone. Unless you were very lucky, most construction just died. . . I remember applying for a cleaning job at a hospital because I just had to get some money.

A chance meeting with an old school friend resulted in Jimmy being offered the chance to join a gang (a group of workers who may have different skills but who work together on a construction site) travelling to Germany, initially for six months. Construction workers have often gone to work in other countries when the alternative is recession at home. In the UK recession of the 1990s, construction workers found many opportunities to work in Germany following its reunification (Green, 2015).

Jimmy went to Germany to work as a ceiling fitter and drywall lining operative, initially for six months. Whilst Jimmy was enthusiastic, his parents were a little concerned about him going abroad. As Jimmy recalls: 'Mum was like, "Oh, are you going to be okay?" I was like, "Yes of course, I'll be fine. I'm with my mates, aren't I? Don't worry about it."' He left in January and he recounts how cold it was:

I remember it was a very cold 3rd, 4th, 5th of January. My mate's Golf GTI Mark 2, all crammed in. Imagine all winter clothes on, ski coats and all the winter clothes you're going to need. We looked at the weather and we're talking minus 20 down there in the winter.

Jimmy relied on the gang master to secure work for them. The gang master was the intermediary between the contractor and the workers. As such, he dealt with pay negotiations, hours of work, time off and other official paperwork, including taxes. (For some migrant workers in Germany at the time, this was an unsatisfactory arrangement, and some were exploited, but Jimmy had no such problems.) Jimmy worked long hours, 12 to 14 hours a day, six days a week and half a day on Sundays, and sometimes in hard conditions. He recalls that he wore many layers of clothes at work to combat the extreme cold.

Jimmy and his friends had some difficulty finding accommodation because there was some prejudice towards English workers:

You'd turn up to book in and they'd go, 'Oh you're English? Oh sorry, we made a mistake. We're very full up.' Which you got quite often because of the reputation of English being idiots and smashing up the places.

This lack of accommodation may have helped strengthen ties with the friends Jimmy travelled with and other English workers he met:

When I first went it was. . . me, my best mate and another chippy. Then we met another gang when we got out there that we sort of knew. We were all from the same town. So we recognized people out there, got to know them and became good friends.

This camaraderie or family-like arrangement is a recurring theme in Jimmy's account; for example, he explains how he and 14 other English migrants rented a bungalow and devised a routine and rota to ensure they had food and beer and were not late for work. Jimmy also relays a tale of enjoying spending time with the locals:

. . . having a laugh, running up huge bar bills. Friends, we had good buddies all over. We had one guy who owned a bowling alley that had pool tables, a bar and places you could eat food. Johann his name was. He was a good mate of ours.

In the summer months Jimmy and his friends would go to the lakes and swim and fish and so forth. He spent a lot of time in bars, but also visited nearby cultural sites, although some of his places of work were very isolated. He says that he learnt the language to get by, especially in some parts of East Germany where English was not spoken as widely.

On visits back home, he spent money conspicuously, and he and his friends tried to 'outdo each other'. He spent money on champagne and designer clothes. Jimmy worked in Germany for three years, often on

three- or six-month contracts. In between contracts he would travel to holiday destinations. He did not have any family responsibilities at the time, so unlike many people he worked alongside he did not have to go home to the United Kingdom or send money home whilst in Germany. According to him, he enjoyed a 'millionaire' lifestyle.

Jimmy does not appear to have seriously considered a permanent move to Germany; he explains that as the majority of people he knew started to return to England, he decided to come back as well:

Once they got money they went back to their families because work was picking up back in England. So, when that started happening, people were going back, your circumstances change with the groups you're working with and travelling around Germany with. That was my point of deciding to come back to England.

However, he travelled to Asia and worked in Australia and considered applying to Australia to emigrate, but his long-term partner was less keen.

Jimmy's experience was very positive; in the short term, he had a job earning good money; in the longer term, he learned a new trade and travelled widely. His new skills set him up for the future and when he returned, he called on the contacts he had made for introductions to site managers and work. He was never out of work again. Jimmy's recollections and reflections reveal that working abroad and travelling broadened his outlook on life and gave him an insight into other cultures. It changed his life and he has encouraged his children to travel and work abroad.

## 5 KRISTINA'S STORY: FROM NORWAY TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

The au pair as an institution and social phenomenon has been little investigated until the last decade (Cox, 2015: 1). And yet we know that being an au pair was a life experience for thousands of post-war European women. Most recent research into the au pair has focused on its role as a modern migratory regulation loophole. Hence, it allows the European and US middle class to exploit poor women for cheap domestic labour (Bowman and Bair, 2017) – a part of the modern 'global care chain' (Bikova, 2017; Hochschild, 2000).

It is almost impossible to find reliable numbers for how many have spent time abroad as au pairs, and the phenomenon as it existed in Europe during the mid- to late twentieth century has not been investigated in any comprehensive way. We know – from business statistics – that the number

has diminished. According to Atlantis, one of the big Norwegian firms placing au pairs, they now send a two-digit number of Norwegian girls abroad every year, whereas in the 1990s they were sending 1000 au pairs each year (Lohne, 2014). One of these was the interviewee we have named Kristina. She was not the only one in her circle of friends and acquaintances. She remembers at least three girls from her school doing the same thing – some to the United Kingdom, and one to Spain. Although she cannot remember exactly how she found out about the au pair opportunity, there were stories circulating of young women having the time of their life abroad, some of which featured in magazines, while others were the shared experiences of older friends and family members.

Kristina was born in a relatively big city in Norway in the 1970s. Her childhood years saw her home country become a truly strong economy and welfare state. Then the recession of the early 1990s hit Norway severely, coinciding with Kristina's graduation from secondary school. The labour market Kristina encountered had not been as tough since the 1930s (Aaberge et al., 2000: 79). However, this did not worry her unduly at the time. Kristina describes herself as a person who was eager to see the world, and her priorities coming out of school were not to enter employment or further education, but to get out in the world and quench her wanderlust:

I got wanderlust from both my parents, they both travelled a lot in their youth. I got it from both of them, while my brother didn't get it at all. The furthest he ever moved was from one Norwegian town to another.

For a Norwegian girl in the early 1990s, with no independent means or family fortune, the opportunities to travel far or long term were limited. The au pair institution was one of the few options available. An au pair is a live-in help with limited responsibilities. The idea is that, as the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition states, the au pair 'cares for children and does domestic work for a family in return for room and board and the opportunity to learn the family's language'. The history of the au pair as an institution dates to the nineteenth century and evolved into a full-fledged industry in the decades following World War Two. In 1969, when the European Agreement on Au Pair Placement was signed, there were about 50 000 au pairs in Europe; this number then quickly multiplied (Hemsing, 2003: 4; Lundberg, 1999). After an initial delay because of family illness, Kristina went to England to live with and work as an au pair for a family with two children. Kristina had done extra credits in English at school and was quite fluent already, but one of her motivations for choosing England was to improve her language skills. As an au pair she would have some independence, but with the security of living with a family.

Kristina's parents were not particularly fond of the idea of their daughter being so far away from home. But Kristina stresses that, first, her parents had themselves been adventurous in their youth; and, second, as she herself puts it 'I was an adult; they did not really have a say in it'. We have already mentioned the role of networks in migration, and the concept of chain migration partly captures what made Kristina choose to be an au pair (MacDonald and MacDonald, 1964). It appeared to her as an option because her parents had travelled, and her friends had made similar choices. However, Kristina is an independent person. She did not rely on family or friends to arrange the practicalities – she went alone, and she went to a place where she knew no one.

Kristina initially enjoyed her stay in the United Kingdom. Her chores were not too demanding, and although the salary was not high, she managed to have a social life – mainly through getting to know the other au pairs she met in her language classes. Later, everything changed. She changed host family when the first family no longer needed her, and she fell out with the father of the new family. In a flurry of events, she quit suddenly and mobilized her local network of peers:

I had a French friend who lived not too far away. She had a car, so I called her and she came to pick me up. And my Lebanese friend, he lived in a dormitory, so I stayed with him that night. And then, just the week before, I had met some new friends – I went to them and asked if I could crash on their couch. At their place, I met the boy who would become my boyfriend. I moved in with him after two days.

In a way, Kristina makes her move seem easy. But it is obvious that it was not painless:

The only thing was that I was so hungry. I was hungry 'cause I had no food. I didn't want to ask for help. So that was the only thing, that was bad.

From there, it went downhill. The relationship with her boyfriend was spontaneous, and Kristina explains that she had been quite convinced from the start that it would not last. But it did, and, in the end, he even joined her back in Norway. Throughout the two interviews, Kristina drops hints as to the relationship being borderline abusive, in the sense that her boyfriend was controlling and jealous. For instance, amongst the few jobs she managed to secure, one of them ended because her boyfriend became jealous when she had to stay late one night. Since Kristina was a foreigner with no legal status in the United Kingdom, finding a job was not easy, and she had no social rights. This was in the middle of the 1990s recession, and times were tough. In essence, the couple lived off the

boyfriend's meagre unemployment benefits. In the first interview Kristina states that they rarely had enough to eat:

I remember, that year, we were so badly off, I lost 13 kilos in half a year, simply from not having enough to eat.

Kristina recounts feeling that her boyfriend had 'the power in the relationship', an experience reminiscent of the stories told by female migrants globally. Finding a partner in the host country may ease the way to integrating into a local community, but it may also leave women vulnerable to exploitation (Heyse, 2011: 210). Returning to Norway changed that – in her home country, Kristina had the network and the resources to make her own decisions. Still, the relationship lasted for more than a year after she returned, before she kicked her boyfriend out.

Summing up, Kristina has mixed feelings about her time in England. Speaking of her youth, she hesitates when asked about whether she initially thought about the possibility of staying permanently in the United Kingdom:

I took it a little day by day. I did think about staying, perhaps to study. . . But, in reality, it was really difficult to get a job in England back then. I didn't have any education.

However, whilst in the United Kingdom she passed some language exams and learned a lot. She still has her wanderlust and – despite later periods of unemployment and low finances – has managed to travel further. Kristina states that she enjoys trying to blend in in a new country, learning the social codes in a new place – 'being a chameleon', understanding the culture – as the attraction of travel and migration. On the other hand, the relationship with her boyfriend was very destructive and difficult to separate from the overall experience.

## 6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter we presented three cases of migration, each of which recounts a different life story affected by the interplay of distinct structural conditions and active agency. Still, we see in them many common characteristics, which allow us to understand the subjective aspect of the decision to look for work abroad, to live in migration and to return to one's native country.

Regarding the first part of our first research question – why young people faced with a difficult transition to the labour market decide to migrate – we find two basic motives in the three cases. Foremost is the

economic motive – the desire to find work, to earn better pay than what one's native land can offer. This is especially important in the cases of Kalina and Jimmy.

The second basic factor motivating the respondents to migrate is their desire to travel, to discover new cultures and to meet interesting people. Regarding internal resources, it emerges that all three interviewees are – or have become – special people, in the sense that they all mention something akin to a sense of adventure and a certain restlessness as personality traits. Perhaps this is a prerequisite for taking the kind of leap into the unknown represented by labour migration.

Another important aspect in the three cases is informal ties and networks. These relationships help to explain why these three young people made the decision to migrate and, alongside this, they explain the choice of destination country and the duration of their stay. In all the cases, we see how networks of colleagues, family, friends and acquaintances play a role in the different stages leading up to the decision to migrate, as well as in relation to the decision to return to the home country.

In the case of Kalina, her labour migration(s) were almost completely grounded in her belonging to a specific ethnic minority. As mentioned, Sarakatsani have long-standing traditions of moving for work. After the political reform of 1989, and with economic difficulties in the wake of Bulgaria's transition to a market economy, the group started looking for employment in Greece (Pimpireva, 2013: 35). Without denying Kalina's independent agency as a young migrant, it is natural to see her movements across the Bulgarian–Greek border as part of a pattern – shaped by her choice, but also by national economies, ethnic history and communal decisions. Sarakatsani associations, such as the one Kalina mentions in her interview, help members obtain visas, because membership in itself speeds up the process. In short, throughout the 1990s, seasonal migration by Sarakatsani into Greece was a mass phenomenon. It also has to be emphasized that many other Bulgarians chose this country for migration because of its closeness and/or the fact that they already had relatives, friends and acquaintances there (Stanchev, 2005: 27). This aspect reveals once more the decisive role of informal networks in migration decisions. Significant for the active agency of the young migrants in this period is the freedom to move outside the borders that Bulgarians obtained after the collapse of communism. This fact considerably increases actors' perception of what can be achieved and provides an alternative pathway for active agency.

Another aspect that was important for Kalina's experience with labour migration was that she moved with her family. Being surrounded by kin not only helps in decision-making but will of course also be a source of security for most young migrants – socially, economically and practically.

However, Kalina also mentions being sociable with strangers when abroad – in other words, she was not confined to her own migration network, rather sought out new, interesting people.

Networks were a recurring feature in Jimmy's story. Many construction workers moved to Germany and perhaps this made it easier for others to follow. Jimmy took up an opportunity offered by a family friend. He migrated with friends and knew people who were already working in Germany, then met more once he became established. The network of friends seems to be a deciding factor in Jimmy's initial decision to go and then to find a job there. He worked alongside many English people and they appear to have formed a family-like unit and thus relationships and ties – spending leisure time together, arranging trips and so forth. It was the loss of this network, as people started to return to England as work picked up, that led to Jimmy's decision to return.

Kristina cannot be said to be part of a mass phenomenon to quite the same extent as Kalina and Jimmy. Kristina went abroad on her own. However, in her decision-making process she was surrounded by friends and acquaintances who had made similar choices to her. Her parents were somewhat worried, but Norwegian youth culture at the time promoted 'going out and seeing the world' as a strong ideal. While in the United Kingdom, Kristina created her own migration network, and although she did not get to know a lot of the locals, she bonded with other foreigners who shared her life situation. This is not unusual (Sørensen, 2003: 854). She got to know other au pairs in her area and made friends in her language classes. We might take note of the fact that, although Kristina got along with her first au pair family, they do not seem to have been relevant to her as a support system when she fell out with her second employer. This is consistent with other research on the au pair institution, as it seems to be characterized by 'fragile or absent residence permits' (Stenum, 2015: 107) and a lack of security. Although relatively privileged compared to modern au pairs, Kristina was a marginalized and vulnerable young migrant. In crisis, Kristina turned to her peers in migration – the friends she had made 'on the road' – even before contacting her own family in Norway.

All three respondents indicate that building informal ties and making new friends in a foreign country are positive aspects of their lives in migration. This achievement greatly contributes to their positive subjective assessment of the consequences of migration for their personal well-being – which answers our second research question. Despite the difficulties Kristina had, mostly involving her problematic relationship with her boyfriend, she too mentioned having interesting experiences with friends, and experiences related to travel, learning a foreign language and meeting new people. In Kalina's case, migration gave her a positive feeling in new

places and amongst interesting people, in addition to the opportunity of earning better pay. Though her work in agriculture was hard, her life abroad has raised her self-confidence and made her feel happy. Jimmy was also satisfied with his experience abroad, despite the hard work it involved – 12–14 hours a day. The fact that he built good relations with other migrants in the same situation as him also contributes to his positive assessment. He talked with pleasure about amusing experiences with migrant friends, his travels, and how he had managed to learn the local language. All three respondents gained a feeling of independence as adults making decisions by themselves and managing their lives.

So why did they return? Once again, we see that relationships and family ties influenced the decisions of these young people. Kalina intended to remain abroad in Greece but did not do so because of her partner. She returned and stayed in Bulgaria to be with her husband and to take care of her child. Jimmy came back, following his friends who had returned; then later, he chose not to migrate to Australia because of his girlfriend. Family ties seem to be more important than the motivation to live abroad for economic reasons – a finding in tune with other recent research into return migrants (Yehuda-Sternfeld and Mirsky, 2015: 54).

The consequences of migration are not all positive, of course. Jimmy was the only one of the three who did not mention any negative sides to his experience abroad. Kalina shared with a degree of sadness that, because she had constantly been working abroad, she had no social contacts in Bulgaria and could not find a job that met her salary expectations. She was also concerned that she had worked without contracts, and therefore had no length of service or insurance. For Kristina, the time spent abroad included memories of extreme situations and severe personal problems. In those difficult moments, she missed her family and the support of her friends at home. All three stories point to the increasingly transnational nature of the professional and personal lives of young Europeans.

## 7 CONCLUSION

The open borders of Europe are – perhaps rightfully – hailed as an incredible opportunity for its citizens to find livelihoods outside their countries of origin. Many, but far from all, avail of this opportunity. Kalina, Jimmy and Kristina did, and it has shaped not only their lives while abroad, but also their outlooks on life, their economic situation and their future trajectories.

Despite each of the three narratives being unique life stories, they have more similarities than differences. None of these interviewees regrets the

decision to migrate, and all look at it as a decisive part of her/his life course. In the beginning of their professional careers, they experienced job insecurity and made the leap to look for better opportunities abroad. Regardless of whether these choices ultimately produced more negative or positive consequences, all three interviewees should be considered highly active authors of their own life projects. They are constructed as 'autonomous, active, free' and hence mobile individuals, who are building their own lives by taking a course of action.

The task for policymakers is to create safe and secure conditions for these kinds of active/mobile lives. Work without a contract is a significant problem for many young migrants, especially for those working in seasonal or short-term jobs. There is a need for more severe penalties and sanctions against employers who do not sign contracts with their employees. In addition, for all three interviewees, transferability of social insurance rights would have eased the burden of moving between national systems and made it more attractive to seek legal work. In some cases migrants accept work beneath their education and qualification levels because of long and slow procedures for recognition of qualifications acquired in their homeland (Akgüç and Beblavý, forthcoming). Less bureaucracy concerning the recognition of education and professional qualifications can benefit both the employers in the destination country and the young migrants. Furthermore, employees across Europe would benefit from recognizing the value and skills with which these young people return. The knowledge and the skills learned abroad can be used for further development. In this regard, support from a career guidance counsellor (from the employment offices or from NGOs) can be very important in achieving transition to the labour market and transforming the migration experience into a stepping stone for a better life at home, as discussed by Lewis and Tolgensbakk (Chapter 10 this volume). Living and working abroad is a significant episode in the biographies of young people that affects their subsequent life trajectory. It is the result of active agency by young people seeking to improve their job prospects.

In view of the idea that migration is not a problem but an opportunity from which one can benefit, decision makers could learn from these three stories that one cannot restrict the desire of people to travel, to seek a better life abroad, or to learn new knowledge and skills from other nations. We see that economic factors are especially important for the decision to migrate and/or return, but they are not the only motives: the three cases point both to the importance of ties to family and friends and to the power of wanderlust. All this indicates that political decision-making on migration should not aim at restricting it or stopping it, rather at better management. The goal should be to ensure that migrants comply with

national laws, but also that these laws protect the rights, health and life of the people who have decided to follow their urge to seek new experiences and a life abroad.

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