

Editorial Introduction

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Intra-EU Mobility in an Era of Complex Economic and Political Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the special issue on 'Intra-EU mobilities in times of crisis'. Intra-EU mobility has emerged as an ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand, EU-wide opinion polls still depict freedom of movement as the most positive aspect of European integration. On the other hand, with nationalism and xenophobia on the rise, migration and mobility are increasingly problematized and challenged. Shifting attention from the master narratives about intra-EU mobility, the aim of the special issue is to bring to the fore the lived experiences of the key actors as recounted in a period of multiple European crises which, in turn, represent the visible and mediatized manifestations of more complex and deep-seated processes of political and economic change. Here we provide a chronological periodization of intra-EU mobility trends over recent decades and how they intersect with major geopolitical events, aiming to contextualise the special issue articles which are then presented.

INTRODUCTION

At this specific moment in Europe's history, as we move into the second decade of the 21st century, questions of national identity, borders, belonging and migration are particularly pressing. Key amongst this complex amalgam of issues, and the subject of this special issue, is the way in which a series of so-called "crises" has challenged the hitherto taken-for-granted principle of freedom of movement within the European Union and the Schengen area. Currently, ambivalence on this principle prevails. On the one hand, successive EU-wide opinion polls continue to depict freedom of movement as the most positive aspect of European integration (European Commission, 2010, 2014, 2018). On the other hand, with nationalism, populism and xenophobia on the rise, not only in Europe but across the globe, migration and mobility are problematized and challenged.¹

It is over-simplistic to ascribe the above trend to a single date or event, but it does seem that questioning the ethos of free movement can be traced to the major eastward enlargements of the EU in 2004 and 2007. Only the UK, Ireland and Sweden opened their labour markets to migrants from the ten accession countries in 2004; the other EU countries imposed a transition phase, a strategy that the UK, Ireland and Sweden also adopted with the 2007 enlargement, when Romania and Bulgaria joined. The massive scale of the movement of Polish and other "Eastern" migrants into the UK in the years succeeding 2004, albeit these migrants made a significant contribution to the destination country's economic growth, took certain sections of

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the British population by surprise, and arguably sowed the seeds of anti-immigrant sentiment that surfaced in the Brexit debate a decade later.

In the meantime, two other crisis events shook the continent of Europe; in both cases, the effects manifested themselves in a very marked geography of impacts. The global economic crisis, triggered by reckless behaviour at the very top of the finance and banking sector, created unemployment, economic retrenchment and austerity policies which lasted for several years after the crisis broke in late 2008. Within Europe, it was a range of “peripheral” economies that were most affected: to the west, Ireland; to the north-east, the Baltic states, especially Latvia and Lithuania; and to the south, where the effects were more lasting, Greece, Spain, Portugal, and to a lesser extent Italy.

Second came the so-called refugee crisis of 2015-16. Politicians, academics and the media tended to speak of the “refugee” or “migrant crisis” largely in terms of numbers (more than 1 million people crossing the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas in little more than one year), the majority fleeing the brutal civil war in Syria. But the real crisis was (and remains) one of the lack of European political solidarity in the face of the sudden refugee and migrant arrivals; and, at a humanitarian level, resides in the shocking numbers of people losing their lives in the Mediterranean Sea (Crawley, 2016). Whilst the application of the term “crisis” to this major migratory event is probably justified, we must be attendant to the causes of this, and other crises, and be aware of the dangers of over-using the trope of crisis for dramatic effect, resulting in the trivialisation of the term.

FREE MOVEMENT?

As Recchi and Salamońska (2015) point out, the EU movement regime contained a fundamental ambiguity in its inception. It was initially propounded as an emancipatory project; a right to mobility that ignores nation-state frontiers. In practice, however, it has remained grounded in market-building principles, which have formed the increasingly neoliberal driving force of European integration, seen as an economic project rather than a political or ideological one. Free movement, of workers especially, has been expected to function as an adjustment mechanism to ameliorate growth differentials and efficiency bottlenecks in the European economy, whilst at an individual level respecting the right of people to move in order to improve their employment and income situations (Zimmermann, 2014). The prevalence of such “economistic” arguments to legitimize intra-EU mobility seems to have emptied the free movement principle of its emancipatory character. And this is quite apart from the issue of the precise nature of the economic gains achieved, which are widely contested in both the sending and the receiving countries.

What is the view of the intra-Eu movers themselves? In this special issue we shift attention from the master narratives about intra-EU mobility to the lived experiences of the key actors as they are recounted in a period of multiple European crises which, in turn, represent the visible and mediatized manifestations of more complex and deep-seated processes of political and economic change. Here again we note, along with Favell and Recchi (2019), a fundamental contrast, this time between the “everyday” experiences of migrants and other cross-border movers on the one hand, and the ongoing political shift towards Euroscepticism or, as Favell and Recchi call it, “Eurogloom”, on the other. Despite fragmented European geopolitics, new regimes of border control and the roll-back of European citizenship rights, there are deepening cross-border connections at a variety of levels (migration, cross-border

travel, transnational family and friendship networks, cultural consumption etc.) which continue to build an interconnected European social space. This “social transnationalism” (Mau 2010) is a reality whose most emblematic feature continues to be the free movement of persons embodied by European citizens. Despite, but also in some instances because of, different “Eurocrises”, the numbers of European mobile citizens are constantly rising – from a “stock” of less than 10 million EU nationals living in another EU country in 2007, to nearly 14 million in 2012 and 17 million in 2017.

Focusing on a diversity of mobile Europeans in terms of their national origin, class background and age, the papers in this special issue explore the aspirations underlying different mobility decisions and strategies, and the challenges and opportunities of leading a transnational life in Europe today. They also explore feelings of belonging and issues of identity, and how these, and other aspects of everyday life, are impacted by austerity politics, resurgent nationalism and increasing inequality across European countries. Taken together, the papers offer nuanced answers to many questions. Is mobility seen as an opportunity to advance one’s life and achieve personal development? Or is it more of a coping strategy in a period of neoliberal deregulation and economic uncertainty? How do intra-EU migrants react to the crisis in the welfare state – both in terms of the challenges this poses for their own well-being and the opportunities this provides for employment in privatized care services? How can the experiences and the viewpoints of the migrants be assessed? What lessons can be drawn by those who may be considered the “pioneers of European integration” (Recchi and Favell, 2009) in that they promote it from below, while at the same time are often a product of its present-day shortcomings?

In the remainder of this editorial introduction we do two things: first, an attempt to map out a chronological periodization of intra-EU mobility trends over recent decades, including how they intersect with major geopolitical events and crises; and secondly, an overview of the papers in the special issue, demonstrating how they hang together as an integrated and complementary set.

MOBILITIES AND CRISES

There have been several recent attempts to trace a typology of phases for the evolution of European migration and mobility patterns (e.g. Baláž and Karasová, 2016; King and Okólski, 2019; Recchi, 2015; Van Mol and de Valk, 2016). We discern three phases in the development of intra-EU mobility over recent decades. The first one starts in the early 1990s with the introduction of European citizenship and the progressive removal of the EU’s internal borders following the Schengen Agreement. The second phase was ushered in by the eastward enlargements of the EU in the mid-2000s and the consequent sudden growth in East-West migration and mobility. And the third one starts with the Eurozone financial crisis at the end of the 2000s, with enduring effects through the succeeding decade. Within the period of the third of these phases, we also locate the migration and refugee crisis of 2015-16, and the Brexit referendum of June 2016. In the background of this third period we witness the looming welfare crisis, created politically by strict austerity policies and a shift to neoliberal economics in many countries, and demographically by the ageing of the population throughout the continent.

Each of these events, whether they be designated as a crisis or not, should not necessarily be seen as initiating a new round of migration and mobility dynamics, but rather as adding new layers of complexity to already-existing patterns. These changes, sometimes

sudden and in other cases more evolutionary, can also be applied to the main motivations for moving, to the ways that mobility is practised, and to who are the main protagonists. The evolving pattern over the past three decades comprises both uncertainty and change. But overall, and influenced by episodes of crisis, we observe a backlash against free movement and a re-nationalization of states' power to control migration.

The early years of free movement

The introduction of European citizenship by the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, which strengthened the right to free movement both symbolically and substantively, was followed by only a modest increase in intra-EU mobility (Recchi, 2015). The removal of legal barriers to movement did not open the floodgates, partly because the economic inequalities across the EU15 – essentially “Western” Europe – were not that great, and partly because the barriers of language and culture were real. People's social and economic networks – of employment, family, friends and leisure activities – were mostly firmly rooted in their countries and regions of origin, and the mere facilitating of free movement was insufficient to incentivize them to move.

Despite a limited aggregate volume of migration, a “new map” of intra-EU mobilities started to unfold in the integrating space of Europe. The flexibilities afforded to European citizens by the freedom of movement regime as well as wider globalization forces, triggered new mobilities characterized by individualization and shaped by a diversified range of motivations including adventure, study abroad, personal self-realization and seeking a healthier environment in which to retire (King, 2002). Simultaneously, the motivation to move for work-related reasons decreased in importance, behind personal/family reasons and motives associated with quality of life (Santacreu, Baldoni and Albert, 2009).

Three types of mobility can be considered paradigmatic of that period: high-skilled migration, student mobility and lifestyle migration (King, 2002). High-skilled migration was not a new phenomenon in Europe (Salt, 1983, 1992), but it included wider socio-economic categories from the 1990s onward, and also acquired new qualitative characteristics as it entwined with student mobilities and the subsequent careers of young professionals. Favell's (2008) book *Eurostars and Eurocities* is perhaps the definitive qualitative analysis of the intra-EU mobility of this new, youthful, highly educated class, moving for educational, career and urban lifestyle reasons to the most dynamic European metropolises, above all London. Favell highlights the emancipatory value of migration for mobile young EU adults while stressing also the challenges of transnational living. Closely bound up with the formation of the “Eurostar” generation are student mobility schemes, above all the Erasmus programme, actively promoted by the European Commission since the late 1980s. As King and Ruíz-Gelices (2003) demonstrated, to be an Erasmus student is to develop a stronger “European” identity and to be much more likely to subsequently work abroad in another EU country. Finally, in this first phase of the 1990s and early 2000s, migrations for a better quality of life were undertaken by increasing numbers of affluent and/or retired people, typical destinations being coastal and rural areas of Mediterranean Europe (King, Warnes and Williams, 2000; O'Reilly, 2000).

Expansion of flows: enlargement and after

Until the mid-2000s, intra-EU mobility was regarded as uncontroversial. Fewer people were moving than expected. Policy makers strove to increase the volume of mobility, with a dual aim: to serve the goal of economic efficiency and integration, and to encourage a stronger

European “mobility culture”. The year 2006 was designated by the Commission as the “European Year of Workers’ Mobility”. However, just at that time, things began to change. The 2004 and 2007 accession rounds, which incorporated ten “Eastern European countries into the EU (plus Cyprus and Malta), considerably expanded the scale of intra-EU mobility, especially along the East-West axis. But, paradoxically, this new labour mobility between “new” and “old” member states was not treated as an unequivocal success of the European project but, rather, brought the whole free mobility regime into question.

Unfoundedly, pure economics underpinned the scale of the post-enlargement migrations. At the time of their accession in 2007, Romania and Bulgaria had average incomes about one-tenth of the average for the EU15 countries; and while the ratio was less dramatic for the 2004 accession countries, around one-quarter, this was still substantial enough to drive westward migration (Recchi, 2015: 93). To this economic incentive could be added the pent-up frustration of having been locked in behind the Iron Curtain until 1990 and having only limited opportunities for migration in the period that immediately followed the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, due this time to restrictions imposed by the West. The scale of the intra-EU East-West migration is clear: from only 1 million “Eastern” migrants resident in the “West” in 2000, the total rose to 5.5 million by 2012 (Recchi, 2015: 55).

In this second phase, not only the geographical origin but also the nature of the migration changed, with labour migration becoming the dominant type, marked by characteristics of temporary, seasonal and circular mobility, incorporation into mainly manual work, often in informal labour markets, and the establishment of new transnational networks. Most of the migrants found jobs in construction, agriculture, hotels and catering, domestic cleaning and the care sector. These new forms of mobility also brought negative experiences such as discrimination, exploitation, de-skilling, and exclusion from public services. Back in the countries of origin, fears were raised over the “drain” of young people, including those that had education and training that they were not able to capitalise on whilst working abroad.

The new East-West migrations triggered xenophobic reactions in receiving countries, instigated by right-wing politicians and fanned by the media. This produced in turn a backlash against freedom of movement, expressed vocally in countries of the North, notably the UK, which had attracted by far the largest numbers of migrants, including an estimated 800,000 Poles, as well as the Netherlands and Denmark. Reminiscent of older discourses about non-European immigration, East-West mobility was considered to pose a threat to national welfare regimes and local job markets as well as to the social cohesion of specific cities and neighbourhoods. Whilst the fears about the strain on public services, welfare abuse and increased criminality were largely unfounded, a process of stigmatization of Eastern European migrants was underway, and the category of the “East European migrant” emerged as a negatively loaded term, stereotyping such migrants as poor, uneducated, low-skilled, benefits-driven and potentially dangerous (Fox, Moroşanu and Szilassy, 2012; Moroşanu and Fox, 2013).

The current phase: migration and mobility in an era of multiple crises

Intra-EU migration came under further critical scrutiny with the global financial crisis, which affected Europe as whole but most acutely impacted the weaker economies of the EU periphery, especially the southern tier of Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy. This laid the foundations for a new wave of South-to-North migrations within Europe, reprising the direction

of movement of the much earlier labour migrations of the early years of the Common Market from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, but this time made up disproportionately of young unemployed or career-blocked graduates (see Lafleur and Stanek, 2017; also Pratsinakis, King, Leon Himmelstine and Mazzilli, this issue).

These new large-scale outflows of talented young people raised concerns in the southern EU countries about brain drain, and thus painted intra-EU free mobility in a negative light from the perspective of the sending countries too. Similar concerns were voiced in other peripheral EU countries of large-scale outmigration, such as the Baltic States, Bulgaria and Romania: all are facing the prospect of continued acute demographic decline, youth drain and brain drain, exacerbated by extremely low birth rates. These “draining” effects can be ameliorated by return migration, especially if the returnees can be “enlighteners” (Genova, this issue), but on the whole, as the evidence from many countries shows, returns provoked by the reduced availability of jobs in the host countries are at best ambivalent, since the economic situation in the home countries may be even worse (Aspite-Berina, Manea and Berzins, this issue).

Theoretically, a severe economic crisis in a country like Greece or Spain has several effects on migration dynamics. Immigration falls off and the return migration of immigrants increases. An increased number of the country’s nationals are driven to emigrate, whilst emigrants living abroad are less likely to return. Another effect is to trigger the phenomenon of onward migration, whereby already-present immigrants in a country hit by recession do not return to their home country but move on to another destination. There is a growing literature on the onward migration of third-country-origin immigrants in Southern European countries – for example Albanians in Greece onward migrating to the UK (Karamoschou, 2018), Bangladeshis in Italy also relocating to the UK (Della Puppa and King, 2019), Latin Americans in Spain moving likewise to the UK (Mas Giralt, 2017; Ramos, 2018), and Moroccans in Spain onward migrating to Norway (Jolivet, this issue). In all cases, acquisition of the first host country’s citizenship gives the migrants the right to move freely within Europe to the country of their choice.

The way in which the Eurozone crisis, austerity policies and welfare cutbacks, as well as other shocks to the system such as Brexit, interact with individual migrants’ evolving plans for their future lives is another interesting line of analysis. Engbersen, Snel and de Boom (2010) initially described East-West movement within Europe as “liquid migration” because of its temporary, to-and-fro nature without any firm plans for long-term settlement. Against this, Bygnes and Erdal (2017) argued that many of the new migrants were opting for a more grounded, predictable life with socio-economic stability having emerged as an important migration motivation in the current insecure times (see also Pratsinakis, King, Leon Himmelstine and Mazzilli, this issue). Predictability and security are in fact not a given even in the European core. Whilst in most North European countries, EU migrants were able to ride out the more muted effects of the recession there, the effect of the Brexit referendum in the UK, home to more than 3 million EU migrants, was much more unsettling, constituting a rupture in their lives and long-term plans. Some returned home or moved to another country, but the majority remain in “wait and see” mode (see Lulle, Moroşanu and King, 2018). As well as the more recently-arrived migrants, the problems posed by Brexit are equally intractable for longer-resident EU migrants with children. Even if they have acquired British nationality, questions of identity and national loyalty persist (Zontini and Però, this issue), which are also

affected by the “atmosphere” of Brexit. A rise in hate speech and acts of discrimination and violence means that many EU migrants no longer feel “at home” or “welcome” in the UK (Mazzilli and King, 2018).

Outside of the UK, other North European states responded to the continuing increase in intra-EU mobility with policy measures and bureaucratic hurdles designed to limit the access of European citizens to social rights. For instance, in Belgium residence permits were withdrawn from unemployed EU citizens, who were considered to represent an unreasonable burden on the public purse. These measures were often supported by the European Court of Justice which moved towards a narrower interpretation of free movement rights (Blauberger and Schimdt, 2017; see also Barbulescu and Favell, this issue).

At the same time, the eruption of what came to be designated the “European refugee crisis” graphically uncovered the lack of solidarity between EU countries in the face of such an emergency, and exposed the deeply problematic connection between the freedom of movement regime and the enforcement of controls at the EU’s external borders. The refugee crisis also played into the hands of the advocates of Brexit in the UK, who cynically manipulated images of long queues of migrants and refugees at the North Macedonian border as if these queues were about to enter Britain. The Brexiteers’ slogan of “take back control (of our borders)” echoed into other European countries where the moral panic over the breaching of the external borders of Europe led to harsh policies with negative consequences for desperate populations. Particularly on the south-eastern flank of Europe, facing the main routes of refugee movement through Turkey and the Western Balkans, internal borders were re-erected, led by the xenophobic stance of Hungary. The era of free movement seemed to have ended.

To the extent that it still exists, freedom of movement presents an opportunity structure to millions of European citizens looking to move to another country – for family reasons, to further their education, to join a romantic partner, to explore different cultures and lifestyles, or to improve their material lives in current uncertain and insecure times. Free movement also fosters more “European” and “cosmopolitan” identities, as recent research by Pötzschke and Braun (2019) has demonstrated.

Yet, other challenges and potential crises remain as more systemic or structural constraints to the continuation of free movement. Across Europe, and beyond, we observe a rising tide of nationalism, populism, xenophobia and parochialism. Spearheaded by the outspoken Viktor Orbán of Hungary, many former accession countries’ leaders have closed minds towards refugees, immigration, multiculturalism and diversity. Euroscepticism is rife in the UK, driven by charismatic but mendacious political leaders who deal in sound-bites and false promises, and skate over the economic realities of what any form of Brexit would mean. Far-right political movements also gain electoral support in many other EU countries. Europe is not alone in this trend. Globally there is a shift to right-wing masculinist demagoguery in the embodiment of Trump, Putin, Netanyahu, Erdoğan, Bolsonaro, Modi and many more, which somehow gives aura of legitimacy to Europe’s extreme-right leaders. The spread of international terrorism also adds fuel to the fire of the anti-migration coups.

Finally, Europe confronts a welfare crisis, whose interactions with migration are more complex. An ageing population requires more resources to be devoted to the health and social care sectors, yet the neoliberal turn in the wake of the economic crisis has led to the commodification and privatization of elderly care and many other social and welfare services.

Migrants play a significant role in staffing these services, often under poor pay and contractual conditions. At the same time, as pointed out earlier, migrants' own rights to welfare are being eroded. Several papers in this special issue explore the migration-welfare nexus.

OVERVIEW OF THE PAPERS

Ten papers follow this editorial introduction. All speak to the notion of “crisis” in various ways, bringing rich empirical detail to various national and comparative settings. Rather than attempt to summarize the papers – this is done by the abstracts – we offer here a very brief overview narrative which integrates the papers together as a coherent sequence.

The first four papers analyse different migration responses to the global economic crisis. For migrants from the peripheral countries most deeply impacted by the crisis, the main trajectory of movement has been outwards. Two papers exemplify this escape mechanism. The first, by *Pratsinakis, King, Leon Himmelstine and Mazzilli*, looks at how young adult South Europeans have been pushed away by the tightening labour markets of their home countries. Yet the participants, who were interviewed in London, also articulate non-economic reasons for their migration, which are summed up by the authors as “post-materialist motivations and pro-migration dispositions”. This paper can be compared with the succeeding one by *Lulle, Coakley and MacEinri* on young Irish migrants, also in London, which demonstrates how “post-crisis” migrants mobilize both existing, inter-generational mobility networks and a historically-grounded Irish migrant identity to create a new migratory phase where “national” and “global” co-exist.

For migrants from outside the EU15, the crisis has a somewhat different set of impacts, illustrated by the next two papers. *Jolivet* analyses the reaction of a sample of Moroccan migrants in Spain – onward migration to another European country, Norway. *Aspate-Berina, Manea and Berzins* look at the “return” option amongst Latvians and Romanians interviewed back in their home countries. For Latvians, the economic crisis intervenes in a double sense: increasing their outmigration from Latvia in the years post-2008 (since Latvia was strongly affected by the crisis), but also provoking some return migration because of difficult conditions abroad. Romanians, who had mainly migrated to Italy and Spain, were returning because of the effects of the crisis in these two countries on their ongoing livelihoods. For both groups, return was seen as an ambivalent event, provoking continued uncertainty about their current and future lives.

The next paper, by *Genova*, also addresses migration from an “Eastern” EU country, Bulgaria, and embeds this migration within two different types of crisis. First, the difficult democratic transition in Bulgaria, with its political volatility and socio-economic fragility, produces a national “crisis narrative”. Migrants leave this crisis behind only to confront a new one in “Brexit Britain”, where they have to deal with ongoing uncertainty over their rights to stay, and a climate of anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic sentiments. The result, amongst the participants interviewed by Genova, all highly educated students and professionals, was a kind of positive reinvention of their identities, either as “ambassadors” dedicated to presenting a positive image of Bulgaria, or as “enlighteners” bringing new ideas back to Bulgaria.

The paper by *Zontini and Però* is set more centrally within the ongoing atmosphere and public discourse of Brexit, and focuses uniquely on the affective reactions and identificatory challenges of “European” – here, specifically Italian – children in the UK. Even without Brexit,

such children are routinely caught between the competing pressures of rootedness and transnationalism. The authors see Brexit as a new movement of crisis for these children, who are provoked into further uncertainties about where they truly “belong”.

The final grouping of papers can be seen as a series of responses to the complex intersection between migrants and the general field of “welfare” – both in terms of the crisis of the welfare state in European countries facing an ageing population, and in the ways in which migrants negotiate their rights to welfare, shaped by state rules on citizenship. In the first paper in this group, *Bruquetas-Callejo* looks at the long-term care crisis in the Netherlands and how migrants from the Eastern accession countries help the country to respond to this crisis within a neoliberal model of welfare reform based around recruiting flexibilized migrant labour. As the author points out, the migrants are caught between two crises, that of the Dutch welfare system and the socio-economic crises in their home countries, where they foresee only a poor future. Next up, *Aksakal and Schmidt* examine the shortcomings in the provision of support for young Spanish migrants in Germany, where there are well-meaning schemes which, however, fail to address migrants’ cultural needs. *Godin* takes this issue one stage further by analysing how intra-EU migrants respond to the challenge of accessing welfare and social protection schemes across borders, based on a study of Spanish and Polish migrants in the UK. Through a “bottom-up” approach, including the novel idea of a “welfare elasticity corridor”, the author explores how, at different stages of a migrants’ life, the welfare systems of the host and destination countries play complementary roles. The special issue is concluded by a “commentary” paper by *Barbulescu and Favell* which unveils the changing access to welfare rights in the EU at the nation-state level, taking the comparative context of the UK and Germany. Their paper portends a process, arguably a new crisis, through which the ideal of a “post-national” European citizenship is being dismantled by the discriminatory actions of individual states, often responding to populist political pressures.

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¹ Throughout this paper, we use “migration” and “mobility” more or less interchangeably, whilst also respecting the nuanced differences in common uses of the terms – for instance student mobility, but lifestyle migration.

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