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Young Baltic Graduates Living and Working in London: From Peripheral Region to Escalator Region in Europe

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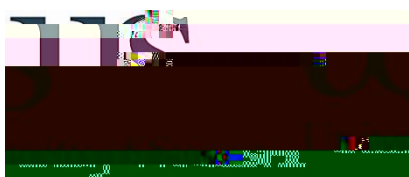
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Abstract

This paper examines

brought the three Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), along with five other East European countries, into the European Union; and the 2008 financial crisis which particularly affected countries on the various peripheries of Europe.

A third context is provided by Engbersen and Snel's (2013) characterisation of post-accession migration as '*liquid migration*' – clearly inspired by Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (1999). According to Engbersen and Snel (2013: 33-35), liquid migration has the following characteristics: it is *invisible* in the sense that migrants do not cluster in ethnically defined neighbourhoods; the migration is predominantly *work- and income-related*, based on the legal right to settle and/or move back and forth; migration flows are *unpredictable* in that they do not build on pre-existing routes and networks; they are *individualised*, mainly made up of migrants who have yet to establish their own nuclear families; and finally there is a '*migratory habitus*' of *intentional unpredictability* – many migrants have no fixed aspirations or plans about their future. Many of these features resonate with our study, as we shall see.

Fourthly, we can hardly avoid mentioning the *transnational character* of this intra-

1. What are the main

(Herrschel 2007: 34). Migrants from the Baltic states are resistant to their stereotyping inclusion as part of the bigger flows of Eastern Europeans and hence lumped in with Poles, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Romanians etc.

Following independence, all three countries adopted the neoliberal economic path and went through extensive privatisation. This led to increased socio-economic inequality, most marked in Latvia. The period since EU accession in 2004 has witnessed three economic phases, each lasting 3-4 years. High economic growth (upwards of 10 per cent annually during 2005-07) and low unemployment character

class, the 'austeriat', which could barely subsist on greatly reduced pensions, welfare and benefits, with many members forced to emigrate to survive (Sommers and Woolfson 2014).

Despite their shared histories and similarities in economic profile, the three Baltic states are not a c

In his essay (published in the Seers et al. book) on the characteristics of the periphery, Selwyn (1979: 37-39) listed the following key elements:

Lack of effective control over resources. The main economic decisions – what to produce, where, and how to market it – are either taken by the core countries or by multinationals headquartered there.

Lack of innovation. New products, ideas and technologies are imported, and local capacity for research and development is limited.

in order to ‘cash in’ on their economic and human-capital assets elsewhere, perhaps where living costs were lower and lifestyles less hectic.

Other authors have applied Fielding’s escalator model to different contexts. Findlay et al. (2009) find that Scottish graduates achieve enhanced upward occupational mobility by moving to London, and, moreover, that there is a strong return-migration trend to Scotland in early or mid-career. Secondly, Conradson and Latham (2005a) ask whether the ‘escalator London’ effect applies to tertiary-educated New Zealanders who migrate over much longer distances. They find that the career-boosting escalator effect applies to many New Zealanders (and Australians too, most probably), but by no means all. For those whose primary motive for emigrating was not professional advancement but, rather, a ‘filling in’ stage of their lives based on acquiring an ‘overseas experience’, the escalator effect is less relevant. In these authors’ own words, ‘London is not always approached as an escalator region in professional terms, but rather as a dynamic labour market that simultaneously offers the opportunity for travel, experimentation and a spectrum of cultural experiences’ (2005: 170). Thirdly, Conti and King (2015) comparatively studied the internal (South to North within Italy) and international (to London) migration of Italian graduates. They show that, for international movers, London is indeed an escalator region where higher incomes and, especially, better career prospects are on offer compared to what is available in Italy; for this reason, the graduate interviewees were ambivalent or pessimistic about returning to Italy. The same study found that Milan functions as an escalator city for graduates originating from the Italian South; again, return prospects are poor because of the chronic shortage of graduate employment opportunities back home. Finally, and on a wider scale, Favell (2008: 258) acknowledges the relevance of the ‘escalator’ concept when discussing his mobile Eurostars who congregate in, and move between, key Euro-cities such as London, Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam. Later, and especially in our answer to the first research question, we will see to what extent the attraction of London as an escalator region functions as a key motivation for Baltic migrants, but the specificity of the ‘Baltic periphery’ must also be kept in mind.

Studies of elite graduate migrants have mostly focused on those who move within the ‘old’ EU15 (Favell 2008; Ryan and Mulholland 2014). How do graduates from the ‘new’ (ie. post-2004) EU13 fit into this typology? Here, the Eurostar label is less widespread: for them there are more barriers to overcome – less likelihood of a wealthy background of family support; degrees from what are seen as lower-status and obscure universities; maybe rudimentary or no English; plus the standard (British) stereotypes of Eastern European migrants as builders, plumbers, cleaners and agricultural workers. Migrants from the Baltic states do not have a clear image in the eyes of British society, apart from some occasional press linkages to Latvian criminality and Lithuanian gangs. Rather they are almost ‘invisible’, especially in London where, from an external perception, they are mixed in and ‘lost’ within the wider European and multicultural mix (Parutis 2011b). Invisibility and a flexible and open-ended view of their future trajectories are key characteristics of ‘liquid migration’ as earlier defined by Engbersen and Snel (2013).

Perhaps a more appropriate theoretical label to denote Baltic (and other East European) graduate migrants in London and the UK is ‘middling transnationals’ (Conradson and Latham 2005b) – in class and employment terms interposed between the transnational elite on the hand and manual-worker migrants on the other. In another paper Conradson and Latham (2005c) describe the ‘middle-ness’ of young graduate New Zealanders who move to London for a period of work: they are well-educated but rarely do they draw incomes which place them

amongst the high-rollers. Typical employment sectors for them are supply teaching, office work, IT support and social work. For them lifestyle, adventure and taking a career break are as important, if not more so, than developing an upwardly-mobile structured career in escalator-city London. Parutis (2011a) likewise argues fo

Research design and methods

Our core research method for this study was in-depth, face-to-face biographical interviews with non-random samples of graduates from the three Baltic states working and living in London. Whilst each subsample (37 Estonians, 21 Latvians and 20 Lithuanians) was part of an independent study carried out by a different author, the key research instrument (the personal narrative interview) and the research objectives (to explore reasons for migrating to London, living and working experiences there, and prospects for future mobility) were the same. Despite this similarity in research design and questions, a feature of all interviews was their essentially open, interviewee-led nature, allowing each participant to elaborate on what they considered important, rather than simply responding to the research themes of the researchers.

The target population was young graduates aged between early 20s and late 30s at the time of interview. Roughly equal numbers of men and women were interviewed and we sought a range of ages within the age-span indicated above. Whilst some were recent arrivals (though we set one year as a minimum period), others had been in London for up to ten years and a few, mainly those who first came as students, even longer. Given the age, life-stage and mobile/migrant status of the participants, most were single and had no children. Potential interviewees were approached via multiple snowball-sample entry-points, including the

about their reasons for moving to London revealed rather consistent patterns for all three national groups although not, of course, for every single migrant. The most commonly cited reasons were related to improving one's *economic situation* (frequent references to money, income, salaries etc.) and *career prospects* (mainly to achieve professional goals unattainable in the home country). Often these two dimensions – maximising income and enhancing career prospects – were combined together in a single narrative theme. A third narrative subtheme which was often attached to discussions about career development was the notion of migration to London as a project of *self-realisation*. London was seen as a the place where one could test oneself and realise one's true developmental potential, This did not happen overnight and so was mainly articulated by interviewees who had been several years in London and felt that this experience had enabled them to

blocked when his research supervisors left his university. He quickly decided to change tack and became a business consultant in London.

There were changes in my personal life, and a lack of challenges at work contributed too. My ì yR M

market in London, and an allied point, the lack of ID-card requirements for access to the job and housing markets. These features are characteristic of free-flowing or 'liquid' migration and lower the obstacles to adjusting to a different country and culture. Finally, many participants also highlighted the value of learning more fluent English, widely appreciated as the global language of business, finance, the market place, culture, and just about everything else.

Let us illustrate some of these themes with evidence from the interviews. Lukas (27, Lithuanian, owner of a small business) appreciated the ease with which one could develop one's entrepreneurial instincts in London and the UK, in contrast to the bureaucratic and other obstacles to be faced in his own country:

I always wanted to work for myself, I like dedicating myself to work... [When you work for yourself] you get to enjoy all the benefits of your work, whilst if you are working as an employee you only get 20 per cent of the results and the other 80 per cent goes to the owner of the business.

Reinis (male, 25, Latvian) drew attention to the marked contrast in work cultures between the open, constructive environment in the workplace in London and the more closed, negative atmosphere in Latvia. As an intra-company transferee (he worked in banking and had the opportunity to move to London), he had experience of working in the same sector in both countries.

What Latvia lacks is straightforward, pleasant communication – discussion, constructive communication, sharing of opinions and ideas [in the workplace]. In Latvia it is often seen negatively if you want to discuss something; people think you are reproaching them... Constructive critique is really what is lacking there. People know how to communicate here [in the UK] in a positive way.

Looking at the employment profiles of the participants, we see different trajectories: some clearly of the 'Eurostar' type, and others where newly-arrived migrants had to take low-status jobs for a while before being able to move to a better job. An example of the latter type is Ieva (female, 27, Latvian), who had been working for the Foreign Ministry in Riga, which sponsored her to do a Master's in England. Whilst she was away, the crisis struck and she lost the right to return to her old job. She switched her career track to London but found it tough at first:

It was not easy at all. It took me seven months to find the job I am currently doing in London [she works for an international NGO in the field of humanitarian aid]. It was difficult to get interviews... I was sending out loads of CVs and working in a restaurant, it was very tough... But in my third interview I was lucky and got this job.

This kind of profile places Ieva more in the class of 'middling transnationals' (Conradson and Latham 2005b) and exemplifies the trajectory of persistently trying to upgrade from 'any job' to a 'better job' described by Parutis (2011a). We noticed that those who conformed more to Favell's (2008) 'Eurostar' class tended to come from wealthy family backgrounds, and had often had the benefit of extensive international travel, including educational trips, before taking up well-paid jobs in London. A typical case was Katrina (28, Latvian):

Since age 13 I was travelling around Europe, attending summer schools, taking a year abroad, so I was in France, the UK, it's the best way to study languages... Then I decided to study for my A-levels at a boarding school in England... it was easy for me because my parents could afford it... I went to secondary school in [names south-coast town] and then to [names well-known London university].

There are so many people here [in London] – around 10 million, and you are not alone, but you can feel yourself very lonely. Thousands of people all around and yet... you

discuss it. A range of perspectives was evident; but we must also remind ourselves of one of the adages of migration research

against another judgemental aspect of Latvian society, where too much emphasis is given to bodily appearance (see Eglitis 2010). In London, on the other hand,

I am more happy about myself... In Riga I always felt overweight, I was thinking I am fat [laughs]. Now, when I go to the shops in Riga, the shop assistants talk to me in English because I dress differently. I don't use make-up every day or always wear high heels to go out. Why should I dress up, if I am just on my way to the gym?

At 23, Santa was one of our youngest interviewees. Others, who were older and look to a future where they will settle down with a partner and children, expressed ambivalence about whether the UK or the home country is the best place for this. There are plusses and minuses on both sides, but generally there is a reorientation towards returning at this later life-stage, largely for quality-of-life reasons. This is what Mari (female, 30, Estonian) has to say on this subject:

One becomes older and wants to start a family one day. One place I would never want to raise kids is London... It is impossible to send your child to the public (ie. state) school system, there is enormous violence in schools, and the schools are so large. There is also pollution. In Estonia you can take your child to Saaremaa [an island off the west coast] or wherever and show them nature, animals, cows, sheep. A Londoner sees a sheep and says look, a cow!

If we allow ourselves to make one differentiating generalisation between the three groups composing our interview sample, it is that Estonians are more orientated to return than Latvians or Lithuanians. Based both on interview evidence and on our close comparative knowledge of the three countries, we suggest that the main reason for this is the stronger state of the Estonian economy, due partly to the fact that Estonian companies internationalised earlier and hence were forced to adopt more 'Western' attitudes, for instance regarding work practices, marketing and fiscal transparency.

'Stay or return' is not the only choice open to our participants: there are two other mobility scenarios which were mentioned by small numbers amongst our sample. The first is that London becomes a stepping-stone to somewhere else. This 'third way' reflects both the objective difficulties of staying long-term in London (the price of housing, the challenge of education for one's children, the overcrowding etc.), and the unattractiveness or economic impossibility of getting a well-paying job back home. It may also reflect the cosmopolitan identity that comes from living and working in a global, culturally diverse city like London, so that one's career and lifestyle become projected to another global stage. Pondering his future, Reinis (male, 25, Latvian) put it like this:

I want that taste of different cultures, diversity, colours: therefore I think my aim is further than Latvia. I would be happy to get a job in Kuwait, Abu Dhabi or Singapore. If I get an interesting proposal, why not?

For Reinis, London is seen as an access-route to somewhere even more 'different' and exotic, non-European but still within the global network of his particular career field of banking and financial consultancy. This particular sector, it could be argued, has a more extensive global

reach – always, however, limited to other key financial nodes of the global economy – than most other career sectors. Others who contemplated alternative locations mentioned places like New York, or closer to home, Berlin or elsewhere in the Nordic region, Sweden holding particular attraction.

As an alternative scheme for his future, Reinis also laid out the fourth mobility scenario: being based back in Latvia but constantly on the move in the course of his work.

If I return to Latvia, I want to do a job which is very international, probably three-four days outside Latvia each week, or at least several trips a month... Latvia could be a kind of base-place for me, but to have serious business only there, it is just not possible, the Latvian market is simply too small.

Reinis articulates a common perspective for those who have developed an international orientation through their work in London but who are also drawn back to their ‘small’ home country: the contradiction is resolved by looking for jobs in multinational companies’ Baltic branches, with the opportunity to travel and thereby raise the local ceiling.

With

Beyond the neoclassical, neoliberal view, there is another interpretation of the periphery-to-core skilled migration described in this article. This sees such migrations as far

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