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

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Abstract

This paper examines recent migration from three little-studied EU countries, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, focusing on young, early-career graduates who move to London. It looks at how these young migrants explain the reasons for their move, their work and living experiences in London, and their plans for the future, based on 78 interviews with individual migrants. The wide-ranging theoretical context draws on notions of core-periphery, youth transitions, 'easy' transnationalism, 'liquid' migration, and London as an 'escalator' region for career development. Also relevant in shaping these migration flows are EU accession in 2004 and the recent financial crisis. Findings indicate that these highly educated young adults from the EU's north-eastern periphery migrate for a combination of economic, career, lifestyle and personal-development reasons. They are ambivalent about their futures and when, and whether, they will return-migrate.

Keywords

Baltic states, highly educated migrants, London, motivations for migration, lifestyle, return migration

Introduction

Young, highly-educated Europeans are increasingly on the move, travelling, crossing borders, and living, studying and working in other European countries. The phenomenon has many historical antecedents, but seemed to gain particular traction in the 1990s and was then boosted, in different ways, by successive rounds of EU enlargement and the recent economic crisis. Within this scenario of heightened intra-European mobility, London stands out as the single most important destination for highly-educated young people. It is both a global centre of finance, culture and lifestyle, and, despite the UK's political stance of fluctuating Euroscepticism, a 'Euro-city' par excellence where, it seems, all the languages of Europe can be heard in its streets, workplaces and leisure spaces (Favell 2008: 30-31). As a previous SCMR Working Paper demonstrated, the 'lure of London' resonates in the imaginaries of young tertiary-educated adults all over Europe, who see it as the go-to place to earn money, enhance their careers, enjoy a rich cultural life, and access a different lifestyle (King et al. 2014). Many see such a move as a rite of passage en route to completing their transition to 'full adulthood', traditionally conceived as the life-stage of marriage/partnership, children and establishing 'home' on their own. Where a stable home will be, however, is often not very clear in the migrants' minds.

This paper is embedded in several social, economic, geographical and political contexts. Whilst its geographical focus on migration from the EU's little-studied north-eastern or Baltic periphery is one claim to originality, we also want to draw attention to several other innovative features of our analysis. The first, continuing the geographical theme for a moment, is the enduring relevance and indeed rejuvenation of the notion of *peripherality* to explain recent migration dynamics from countries which are spatially peripheral to the economic and political core of Europe and which are further beset by problems of economic and geographical smallness.

A second contextual dimension relates to the *landmark political and economic events* in Europe over the past decade or so. Two of these stand out: the 2004 enlargement which

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-European migration (Parutis 2011a). Although there will always be exceptions, such as individuals who, for one reason or another, turn their back on their home country, most recent (and earlier) European migrants maintain cross-border lives. They do so partly because they want to, often in anticipation of a future return 'home'; partly out of a sense of duty to family and friends; and partly because their to-and-fro movement is facilitated by deregulated air-fares and the keen competition amongst airlines to attract their custom by offering low fares and special deals. We refer to this kind of transnational mobility and lifestyle as '*easy transnationalism*'.

Fifthly, we explore how migration to London and the UK interfaces with *lifecourse transitions* – from youth to adulthood, from education to employment, from unemployment to employment, and from one kind of employment to another. Analytically, these transitions can be distinguished as discrete chronological-age stages in the lifecourse or beset by discontinuities, ruptures and reversals (Hörschelmann 2011). In both ways they can be theorised as a complex process of 'becoming' (Worth 1999).

Finally, we are interested in how highly-educated young adults from the Baltic states are to be regarded in *class, labour market and motivational terms*. Recent intra-EU mobility seems to be polarised between two archetypes. On the one side there is the 'Eurostar' ideal-type of highly-educated, well-paid, multilingual, career-driven graduates who mainly move between the more wealthy countries of the EU and who are concentrated in the major 'Euro-cities' like Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, and of course London (Favell 2008). On the other stands the 'economic migrant' ideal-type, seen as more typical of East-West migration, where migrants move to escape low wages, poverty, unemployment and neoliberal political regimes. We ask, to what extent is this a false dichotomy, and how important are intermediate types such as Conradson and Latham's 'middling transnationalists' (2005a)? And is it only about wages, incomes and careers; or are other, more lifestyle-oriented factors also relevant?

As we shall see later, these contexts do not constitute the entire theoretical canvas on which we depict our empirical material, but they do make up the main elements. With these multiple contexts in mind, and using empirical material from 78 in-depth interviews with young, highly-educated Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians in London, this paper aspires to provide answers to the following main research questions.

1. What are the main characteristics and motivations of young graduates from the Baltic states who migrate to London?
2. How do they describe their working lives in London and other aspects of their experiences of migration?
3. What are their perspectives for the future: stay abroad, return home, or move on somewhere else?

For the purposes of his paper, we treat the 78 interviews as a single sample. Although there are some minor discernible differences between the narratives of the three nationalities, what is most striking is the similarity in responses and discursive themes across all the interviews.

We organise the paper as follows. In the next section we give some background on the Baltic states and their economic and migratory trends. Then, bearing in mind the three key research questions, we engage in a more in-depth discussion of the contextual and theoretical frameworks introduced above. A short outline on methods follows. The rest of the paper is made up of three sections on empirical findings, one on each of the three research questions: hence, reasons for migrating, experiences of working and living in London, and prospects for the future. The conclusion sums up the main findings and relates them to the ongoing conceptual debates on intra-European migration.

Background to Baltic migration

Emerging from the German, Swedish and Russian struggles for territory across the wider region, the three Baltic states, each linguistically distinct, transitioned from a mainly peasant economy to a stage of more modern industrial and urban development by the time of their independence in 1918. The next two decades were idealised as a Baltic Golden Age when the three countries were relatively wealthy and made important contributions to European culture, knowledge and economy, reflected in discourses of national pride (Smith 2005). However, as an outcome of the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, signed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, the three states were annexed to the latter. Yet, throughout the Soviet period, the Baltic republics had higher living standards than most of the rest of the Soviet Union and were seen as ‘the West within the USSR’, a status that generated a ‘seemingly paradoxical sense of “superiority” under the Soviet rule’ (Herrschel 2007: 35).

After the restoration of their independence in 1991, all three countries launched their journeys towards EU membership. As Herrschel (2007: 56) put it, ‘they effectively saw no other choice than “Moscow or Brussels” for their future statehood’. Amongst the current 28 member-states of the EU, only the Baltic trio were formerly part of the Soviet Union. Their imagined geopolitical location reflects both their past histories and future aspirations, and a certain resistance to generalising labels of ‘Eastern European’ or ‘post-Soviet’. Instead their aspirational regional identity leans more towards the Nordic axis, a regional-cultural personality seen most clearly in Estonia.¹ Both at home and (as migrants) abroad, the Baltic populations are aware that the category ‘Eastern Europeans’ carries a negative shading, related to ‘backwardness and the need of “catching up” with the “advanced West” as the “normal case”’

¹An interesting indication of the discursive attempt to remap Estonia as a Nordic country was made in a 1999 speech by the now President (then Foreign Minister), Toomas Hendrik Ilves, to the Swedish Institute of Foreign Affairs, when he famously claimed that Estonia’s aim was to become ‘a boring Nordic country’. For Estonia, ‘Nordic’ signifies political and economic stability, good welfare, and lack of sudden crisis and turbulence (Piiromäe 2012).

(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 characterised the first phase. This was also a period of high emigration, as access to working opportunities in the UK, Ireland and Sweden (the only three EU countries which immediately opened their labour markets to migrants from the 2004 wave of new accession states) gave young people the chance to travel freely and improve their financial status by taking on jobs abroad that were much better paid than those at home. Most migrants went to the UK and Ireland, whose labour markets were more open and buoyant than the more regulated Swedish one. It should also be pointed out that the high rates of GDP growth were largely driven by remittances, consumption, retail trades and mortgage loans rather than investment in industrial enterprises.

This fragile economic foundation was exposed by the financial crisis, which started in late 2008 and had profound effects on the Baltic states' economies, with Latvia hit hardest. Steep GDP decline followed (by 25 per cent in Latvia between 2008 and 2010), and unemployment skyrocketed. Table 1 gives the figures for total and youth unemployment for the three countries for the three key years before (2007), at the height of (2010), and since (2013) the crisis. Total unemployment peaked at 17-20 per cent in 2010; the youth rate was roughly twice as high at 33-37 per cent. The youth unemployment figure had more or less halved by 2013, but still remained significantly above the 2007 level for all three countries – twice as high in Latvia and Lithuania, 50 per cent higher in Estonia. The 'rescue package' also involved implementing austerity measures, cutting salaries in the public sector by 20-30 per cent, reducing pensions, maternity benefits and other welfare provisions (Blažek and Netrdová 2012). A new peak of 'crisis migration' ensued – as reflected in the narratives of several interviewees.

Table 1 Unemployment in the Baltic states, 2007-13

Unemployment	Total %			Youth % (<25)		
	2007	2010	2013	2007	2010	2013
EST	4.6	16.9	10.2	10.0	32.9	15.6
LV	6.5	19.8	14.9	10.7	37.2	19.3
LT	3.8	18.0	11.4	8.2	35.3	18.4

After the crisis, recovery was swift: already in 2011, Estonia's annual GDP growth was 8.3 per cent, with Lithuania at 5.9 per cent and Latvia 5.5 per cent, while across the EU27 the average was only 1.5 per cent. Interpretations of the Baltic recovery vary, however. On the one hand the Baltic states, Latvia in particular, were held up by EU economic planners as models of successful belt-tightening and 'responsible' response to the challenges of the crisis (in marked contrast to what unfolded in Greece). On the other hand there was a much more critical reaction, which focused on the 'sacrificial' role of emigration and remittances in driving 'statistical' economic growth and holding down unemployment, and on the creation of a new

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 closely integrated block, even if their small size (Estonia 1.3 million, Latvia 2m, Lithuania 2.9m in 2014) would indicate potential for scale economies. Learning each other’s languages has never been encouraged, and as a result the neighbouring populations can only understand each other via a bridging language – in the past Russian, currently English.

As well as struggling with economic turbulence and large-scale emigration, the Baltic countries also struggle to create ethnically diverse and representative democracies, especially in Latvia and Estonia, which have large ethnic-Russian minority populations dating from the Soviet era. In 1989 the number of ethnic Russians was as follows (figures in thousands, followed by their percentage share of total population): Estonia 475 (30), Latvia 906 (34) and Lithuania 345 (9) (Heleniak 2003: 138, 141). However the Russian population decreased rapidly after the collapse of the USSR due to the emigration of professional elites and military personnel and their families, but also due to new professional and labour migration trajectories, including to London and the UK. Currently the Russian-origin population has fallen to round 26 per cent of the total in Latvia, 25 per cent in Estonia, and 6 per cent in Lithuania.

Nevertheless, the Russian presence and influence remains a source of unease in the Baltic states, especially after the aggressive behaviour of Russia in annexing Crimea and fostering armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Tension has grown along the border between the Baltic states and Russia, and concerns have been expressed at political and diplomatic level about Russian influence in the Baltic states’ media and about sensitive incidents along the border with Russia.

For all three Baltic countries, a combination of large-scale emigration and below-replacement birth-rate has led to overall population decline: in Estonia from 1.6 million in 1990 to 1.3m today, in Latvia from 2.7m to 2.0m, and in Lithuania from 3.7m to 2.9m. For Latvia and Lithuania, the UK has been the most important migrant destination, while for Estonia it is the neighbouring and culturally close Finland. Yet, young people from Estonia are also attracted to London as the European metropolis. Estimates of the numbers of Baltic migrants resident in the UK and in London are difficult to assemble because of the fluid nature of the migration and the lack of robust measurement in an era of free intra-EU mobility (Lulle 2013). As a rather poor substitute measure, Table 2 gives the total number of National Insurance Number (NINo) registrations for the past decade since EU accession. The data indicate much lower numbers for Estonians, where there is a female majority. For all three groups, young adults (18-34 years) constitute more than three-quarters of the total, whilst Estonians and Lithuanians are twice as likely as Latvians to be located in the London area.²

To sum up: freedom from Soviet occupation, reorientation to the West by joining NATO and the EU, economic fluctuations and large-scale emigration have been the defining features of these three countries over the past 25 years, with mass migration especially taking hold over the last decade, since 2004. A new generation has grown up since independence, and new class formations take shape based on new models of acquiring and consuming wealth, and of accessing human and cultural capital through education. The legacies of the past are still present, but receding, not least through the migration trajectories of the highly educated youth and their transnational lives and plans for the future.

² It should be stressed that the NINo data represent information about stocks rather than flows of migrants. Not all migrants acquire a NINo, and departures do not necessarily de-register.

Table 2 National Insurance registrations of migrants from the Baltic states, 2004-14

NINo registrations 2004-14:	Total	% male	% 18-34	% London
EST	20,998	41.4	80.9	29.3
LV	152,339	52.0	75.7	14.4
LT	278,375	52.6	77.6	30.1

Theoretical contexts

The Baltic states' recent intense experience of emigration represents an amalgam of 'old' and 'new' migration concepts. It is vindication, first, of the salience of push-pull models framed by the uneven geography of opportunity for higher incomes, jobs and career development across the post-2004 EU space of free movement. On the one hand this represents a neoliberal interpretation of the value of migration, facilitating the movement of labour, skilled or unskilled, to places and regions where it can be more productively deployed – the argument of free-market migration economists such as Zimmermann (2014). Zimmermann makes an explicit plea for more migration and labour mobility since 'open and flexible labour markets foster growth, development and integration in Europe... [Migration] is desirable because, in economic terms, it contributes to an optimal allocation of resources, and thus plays a crucial role in generating higher output and welfare' (2014: 4, 6). From a UK perspective, the recent quantification of the substantial net fiscal benefit contributed to the UK economy by EU10 migrants³ since 2004 – nearly £5 billion – challenged public opinion polls' findings that immigration is 'bad' for the economy because of immigrants' perceived drain on welfare (Dustmann and Frattini 2014).

On the other hand recent migration flows, such as those from the Baltic republics and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as from Southern Europe and Ireland post-crisis, are a reprise of another theoretical frame, which stands in direct opposition to neoclassical and neoliberal economics. We are referring here to the core-periphery (or centre-periphery) model which originated from the writings of Latin American dependency theorists in the 1960s (see Frank 1969), transiting through the world systems theory of Wallerstein (1974) and finding expression in Europe in the landmark (but surprisingly little-cited) book of Seers et al., *Underdeveloped Europe: Studies in Core-Periphery Relations* (1979). With its roots in political economy, studies of (under)development, international sociology and economic geography, the core-periphery model was applied by Marxist-inspired authors to help explain the labour-migration flows within and into Europe in the early postwar decades (see, inter alia, Castells 1975; Castles and Kosack 1973; Nikolinakos 1975; Seers et al. 1979). Their analyses saw the economically peripheral countries of Europe, which then lay mainly to the south, as structurally dependent on the core economies of North-West Europe, to which they were bound by ties of trade, migration, tourism, culture, mass media and geopolitics in a straitjacket of unequal power relations.

³ By EU10 we mean the ten countries which joined in 2004: the so-called A8 countries (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) plus Cyprus and Malta. This was followed by the A2 or EU2 countries (Bulgaria and Romania) in 2007, and finally Croatia in 2014. Collectively, we can refer to these countries as the 'EU13', contrasted with the EU15, the countries which constituted the 'old' EU prior to 2004.

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.
- Weak internal linkages within the periphery. Transport and other material flows are between the core and the periphery rather than between countries in the periphery, even when they are close neighbours.
- Likewise, information flows within the periphery and from the periphery to the core will be weaker than those from the core to the periphery; these flows encompass news, media and cultural trends, consumer tastes and lifestyle models.
- Finally, and most important, migration flows, often on a mass scale, are from the periphery to the core, and such flows reflect fluctuations in the core economy. Thus, when the economies of Western Europe expanded rapidly in the twenty or so years between the 1950s and the first oil crisis, that growth was stoked by abundant supplies of migrant labour from the European periphery. And when that period of growth came to an abrupt end in 1974, labour migration was halted and unemployment was ‘exported’ back to the periphery.

All this took place before the dismantling of the Iron Curtain, so there is no mention in Seers et al. (1979) of Eastern Europe; but it is not hard to see how the list of characteristics given above does now apply to the Baltic states and other East European countries, and this will be further evidenced in some of our interview material to be presented later. Where the Baltic countries differ from their Southern European precedents is their small size and hence vulnerability to demographic decline, due to the combination of low birth rate and large-scale emigration, accompanied by the spectre of brain drain if emigration removes many of the top graduates.

More recently, there has been substantial research on the relationship between international migration and uneven regional development in Europe, with the key finding that ongoing and changing migration dynamics contribute to increasing polarisation (see, *inter alia*, Williams 2009; Williams et al. 2004). Yet it is surprising that this research does not make explicit, via the core-periphery model, the macro-spatial geography of such migration flows and uneven development patterns. Hence, a key objective of this paper is to rejuvenate the core-periphery structural framework.

Embedded within core-periphery thinking is another conceptual model linking employment and career development with spatial mobility – the notion of London and South-East England as an ‘escalator region’ (Fielding 1992). Fielding’s important paper was based on analysis of internal migration within England and Wales. Using longitudinal data from the census and from National Health Service registers, he was able to convincingly demonstrate three things: i) that London and the South East attracted disproportionate numbers of highly educated young people in the early stages of their working lives; ii) that these in-migrants achieved accelerated upward socio-economic mobility as a result of migrating to the UK’s core region; and iii) that, later in their working lives, the in-migrants would ‘step off’ the escalator

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 for the ‘middling transnational’ designation of recent Polish and Lithuanian migrants in London, albeit their work experiences are somewhat different from the New Zealanders. The Eastern Europeans, most of whom had tertiary-level education, were initially constrained by their poor English and their hurry to get work, and so took low-level jobs. Subsequently, however, many transitioned from ‘any job’ to a ‘better job’ and a few attained what they regarded as their ‘dream job’ (Parutis 2011a).

In other respects too, we suggest that Baltic migrants (like others from the Central and Eastern European EU countries) are different from the New Zealanders. The latter are very far from home and are unlikely to visit regularly whilst they are away in London. Baltic migrants are just a short, and usually very cheap, hop away on a budget airline (airBaltic, EasyJet and Ryan Air are the main carriers). For this reason we designate them ‘easy transnationals’. This is not meant to be a reference to the airline but to the ease and simplicity of maintaining a transnational lifestyle. Baltic migrants in London, especially those with good jobs and incomes, are easily able to match the standard definitions of transnational activities – for instance, ‘a set of sustained, long-distance, border-crossing connections’ (Vertovec 2003: 3), or, in more detail, ‘the process by which trans-migrants, through their daily activities, forge and sustain multi-stranded social, economic, and political relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create transnational social fields that cross national borders’ (Basch et al. 1994: 6).

Employment-related transitions such as those cited above are embedded within larger-range life-stage transitions. The standard youth-to-adulthood transition consists of a linear progression which involves finding a (decent) job, partnership formation, children, career and a stable home. This, however, is only one model, and other sequences can involve blockages, interruptions and reversals caused, for example, by redundancy, illness, a relationship breakdown or other unforeseen family or life circumstances (Hörschelmann 2011). Alongside the economic and demographic framing of these life-stage transitions and ruptures are other transitions, more cultural in nature, relating to the search for a particular lifestyle. This is where the specific appeal of London – a global and European city with a multicultural vibe and a wide range of cultural attractions – enters our analysis. The existing literature on lifestyle migration (see the review by Benson and O’Reilly 2009) stresses rurality, tranquillity and quality of life; common references are to British middle-class settlers in rural France (Benson 2011) and to international retirees in the south of Spain (O’Reilly 2000). But London (and other major European and global cities) also has a ‘lifestyle’ appeal beyond the economic benefits offered by the job market, as will become apparent in our empirical findings relating to the second research question listed earlier.

Against the life-stage model of youth transition to ‘full adulthood’ are other conceptualisations of ‘emerging adulthood’ as processual, intersectional and situational – in other words a process of ‘becoming’ which is strongly linked to the future and the reshaping of personal ambitions and identities (Worth 2009). This focus on ‘futurity’ (Worth 2009: 1050, 1058) turns our attention to the third research question, which is about our research participants’ perspectives for the future – where they will be and what they want to do there.

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 researchers' own respective social networks, migrant associations and gatherings, social media channels of contact. Interviews were undertaken at a place and time chosen by the respondent, usually as a result of a pre-arranged appointment or a prior meeting, and in a range of locations including workplaces, cafes and other quiet public and private spaces. Standard ethical procedures were observed: provision of an information sheet about the research, informed consent to participate, and permission to record the interview and to use anonymised quotes. Most interviews lasted around an hour, but some were longer and/or involved follow-up conversations. Interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred, usually native language – Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian or Russian – and all were carried out by the authors of this paper. The recordings were subsequently transcribed and translated for thematic analysis, focusing especially on the three research questions which structure the presentation of the empirical findings.

Lacking appropriate sampling frames for our three target groups, we could not construct truly random or systematic samples. We acknowledge that this limits the generalisability of our findings. However, each of the interviewer-authors was also investigating 'her own' nationality community, and this deeper quasi-ethnographic 'insider' perspective allows us – perhaps – to be more confident that the results are unlikely to be biased in any major respect. We say 'perhaps' because the 'insider' view is not without its drawbacks, namely that one is inured to the possibilities of features or changes which would be more apparent to 'outsiders' (Carling et al. 2014; Ganga and Scott 2006).

Reasons for migration

The value of qualitative research based on in-depth interviews is that this approach allows the migrant participants to elaborate on their multiple motives for moving and to nuance the relative importance of different reasons. Questionnaire surveys which ask for the main reason for migration, or to list or rank multiple reasons, tend to be one-dimensional and to force respondents into ticking or giving answers which lack this element of nuance and qualitative interpretation. Our thematic analysis of the parts of the interviews where participants talked

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 make some kind of transition to greater self-confidence and adult maturity through what Worth (2009) has defined as 'becoming' adult or Arnett (2000) denotes as 'emerging adulthood'.

Alongside this primary cluster of migration factors relating to income, careers and self-realisation was another narrative trope which can be broadly labelled *lifestyle*. Usually this was articulated as subsidiary to economic factors, but in a few cases it was the overriding factor. The word *culture* featured prominently as the keyword: London was seen both as a place which offered an exciting and accessible world of 'high' culture (theatre, concerts, museums, art galleries etc.) and as a setting where 'everyday multiculturalism' (street life, the work place, 'ethnic' restaurants etc.) was experienced as an uplifting contrast to the 'white' monocultural society of the home country.

Finally, and highly variable from one participant to another (but with common occurrences across the three groups), were factors of a more *personal* nature, related to individual circumstances, life-stage, family reasons etc. Specific examples were following friends or a boy/girlfriend or partner, the need to escape a difficult family situation, migration out of pure curiosity, and study reasons (to learn English or follow a degree course). More details on these and other motives listed above are now given through the lens of individual case-studies which we also relate to the theoretical contexts outlined earlier.

Most interviewees in their accounts prioritised the economic rationale for their migration to London. Here, we find three distinct pathways to the move. There are those who are already employed but are frustrated by the low salaries and lack of career prospects at home; those who had lost their job, often as a direct result of the financial crisis; and others who left straight after finishing their third-level education, aware that salary levels and career opportunities were limited in their home countries. Vytautas (male, 28, Lithuanian) was a typical example where the 'money' motive was overriding. He had left Lithuania immediately after graduation and found a job as a design assistant in London; subsequently he had returned to a managerial position in Lithuania.

Well, I finished my studies and wanted to have some sort of start in life... I wanted to make some money to start my life, and so I left for London... I had plans... not in terms of time but in terms of money. I mean, I had a plan to buy something, a flat or something [in Lithuania].

Vytautas comes across as a 'target' migrant: being able through migration to afford his own flat in Lithuania enables him to show others that he has achieved 'something' and this is used to justify his migration decision and to increase his social status. Buying a flat in Lithuania is

seen as a 'good start' in life, which he would not have been able to achieve if he was limited to a Lithuanian salary. It is also the case that the 'target' takes longer to reach than anticipated, due to the high costs of renting and living in London, and also the rising price of properties in the Baltic states, especially in the capital cities, so migrants end up staying more years than initially expected.

In few cases, participants had to interrupt their studies for financial reasons. One such case was Beata (age 23, also Lithuanian) whose dire economic situation at home forced her to go abroad to earn some money to fund the rest of her degree programme:

I was studying biology, but because of financial reasons, my mother is alone and I don't have a father, I was forced to postpone my studies. I told everyone that everything is fine and I would come back soon.

However, after three years Beata has not returned to resume her degree. The possibility of earning good money in London, initially working as a bartender combined with other part-time jobs, proved to be too valuable to her. Instead she was hoping to start a new programme of study in London once her English was up to scratch and she could find a job that would allow her to combine study with flexible work.⁴

In most of the interviews, the income/money rationale was combined with other factors, like career opportunities, personal development, or lifestyle. Consider the following interview extract, from Timmo (male, 30, Estonian):

London was partly a challenge and partly a possibility to lead a glamorous life. One can make a lot of money there. One strives for better things. London is a financial centre, the best in the world for this kind of work. When one can make a career in London, you can make it anywhere.

In this short quote Timmo succinctly integrates several mutually-supporting motives. He acknowledges that 'one can make a lot of money' in London because of its status as a global financial centre (the sector where he works), but he combines this with brief statements about career development and leading a 'glamorous life' (a reference to lifestyle). Finally, he alludes to the theme of self-development in his references to 'striving for new things' and 'making it' anywhere.

In these three quotes considered thus far, and especially those from Vytautas and Timmo, we see clear evidence of how London is constructed as an 'escalator' region. Nobody actually used Fielding's exact term (or its directly translated equivalent) but the articulations of the 'escalator effect' are clear in several phrases in the quotes above – for instance 'to make some money to start my life' (Vytautas). The notion of 'stepping on' and then 'stepping off' the escalator (Fielding 1992: 3-4) is indicated in the following extract from Arne (male, 27, Estonian), where again the narrative theme of 'challenging' and 'testing' oneself is very evident:

Taking different jobs and challenges is like conquering a new universe. I went to London to learn how to break through there, and then once I did it, it was a good feeling.

⁴ Strictly speaking, Beata does not fit the criterion of being a graduate. However she has some years of university education and many graduate in the future.

The feeling that you know everything and then you would want to move on, to explore something new again.

The indication in the closing sentence is that London might be only a temporary stage before either returning to Estonia or moving on to another country – an issue which we pick up later when we address the third research question, about future plans.

From our earlier theoretical discussion we saw how escalator regions were an expression of structural and labour-market contrasts between ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ regions, either within countries (the cases of the UK and Italy were noted) or, more relevant to this paper, between countries in Europe. As well as the statistical evidence on trends in migration, unemployment and GDP quoted earlier, plenty of narrative evidence in the interviews revealed the participants’ perceptions of their Baltic homeland as a peripheral region beset by lower incomes, high unemployment, and limited opportunities due to the smallness of the economy and the ‘truncated’ nature of the labour market, especially for specialised and professional jobs. A good example of this sense of combined smallness and peripherality is given by Nika (female, 26, ethnic Russian from Latvia):

I started working in journalism as a stringer when I was just 16... I finished secondary school, then the Law Faculty at the University of Latvia, but I was working all the time during my studies... By 24 I was already head of the news department. I had a good salary by Latvian standards... But the ceiling is just too low in Latvia, it is such a small country and so few newspapers. I saw my friends and classmates leaving for abroad and we (her boyfriend too) also decided to go.

Nika moved first to the city in south-west England where her boyfriend was finishing his studies (thereby illustrating the juxtaposition of career and personal factors) and then, after less than a year, they both relocated to London.

Armins (male, 22, Latvian), who moved straight from university in Latvia to a plum job with a global consultancy firm in London, expressed similar views about the smallness of Latvia and the narrow regional scale of the Baltic states:

Here I have to think of the wider view of the region, not about Latvia. Latvia is way too small for our line of business. If we do something in Eastern Europe, I think about the situation in the Baltics, then Poland, then Central Asia... The scope of thinking here is just very, very different from that in Latvia.

Armins had been educated partly in Russia, and as a fluent Russian-speaking EU citizen, his CV credentials were attractive to global companies working in emerging markets.

The final set of migration factors we consider as part of our answer to the first research question are to do with culture, lifestyle and personal motives. Once again we see how many of these factors are interconnected. Personal factors include joining friends and partners, but also, often, a general sense of boredom with the home country which is seen not only as having a psychosocially dulling effect, but also as holding back personal development. These issues are prominent in the *carpe diem* narrative of Petras (26, Lithuanian) below. Petras felt he had reached a plateau in his academic and professional career in Lithuania: further progress was

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 professors left... Everything came together and I thought: 'I can either carry on here... or I can try to do something different, because if I don't do it now, I never will'.

In other cases, the cultural attractions of moving to London were uppermost in participants' discussions of their migration decision. Quite apart from the economic and career arguments, London's cultural vitality is seen as far superior to anything available in the towns and cities of the Baltic region – or even in Moscow, as the following example from Renars (male, 23, Latvian), who works in financial services in the City, relates:

I was working in Moscow, then I returned to Riga and got this option to work in London. After Moscow London was WOW for me! I know it's not exactly paradise, but after Moscow I thought it would be great to work in a civilised metropolis... It was a great opportunity given to me, which aligned with my attitude always to strive for something better.

In contrast to the financial and business worlds of Petras and Renars, the story of Maija (female, 29, Latvian) shows how her cultural appreciation of London and its jazz scene trumped everything else. She arrived in London with next to no money and for the first two years lived in a squat with other artists and musicians:

I arrived in London with £100-200; I was living on £10 a week and I was fine. We had places to live, we shared food and Oyster cards [for travel around the city]. I was totally not interested in earning money in London. I was pursuing my dream: I was in London and the jazz life here is so fantastic... I was just totally bored by the music circles in Latvia. And I developed a circle of friends [here in London] very quickly. I wanted to be among musicians; this is my world, these are my circles... Finally I am living as I wanted... I have a music centre, I have a guitar, I have things I need and I feel fine.

Life and work in London

How do the reasons articulated above for migrating to London square with the actual experiences of living and working in the city? Given that, for most participants, the economic set of factors (income, employment, career) was paramount, many interviewees talked at length about their working lives since migration. Frequent comparisons were made with the difficult conditions in their home countries – although this was less the case with Estonia. As we saw from some of the previous quotes, seeking jobs in London was not just about economic pay-offs, but also about building up valuable work skills and experience, which could either be taken home upon return, or used to progress their careers further in the UK or internationally. Key themes in this narrative category include reference to new 'cultures of work' – more open, meritocratic, less hierarchical – and the encouragement to develop managerial and entrepreneurial skills. Participants stressed the buoyancy and hyper-flexibility of the labour

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 in 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].

Katrina then went on to describe her work: in the City in emerging markets.

I have such a great and interesting job. I would not have this in Latvia – the salary, I can't imagine how different it would be, but that is not the most important factor. The most important thing is that, being in London, I can grow. [...] In my work, I am never looked at as second-class... [In my field] there are no Latvians at my level, I am exotic, I feel special.

Katrina's twelve years in England and her elite 'British' education have given her self-confidence and the ability to 'trade' on her Latvian identity. For others, it was simply about being recognised in the employment stakes for what they are and what they can do, rather than where they came from. Let us return to Ieva to reinforce this point.

I am Ieva and I know that nobody judges me according to my ethnicity. I am evaluated according to what I do, and I really feel that I am appreciated. It was not like that in Latvia... The most important thing is that I am appreciated for the way that I generate ideas, my work capacity... I understand that 'hard workers' is a stereotype about Eastern Europeans and that can be used to exploit you more and more, but in my case I really feel that this appreciation is sincere.

The nature of some sectors of work in global corporations and financial institutions in London makes the workforce increasingly cosmopolitan, which on the one hand inhibits full 'integration' into British society, but on the other hand does not really make this necessary. Another soundbite from Katrina:

I found it rather difficult to integrate into English society, but in my work it is rather easy [to integrate] because the people working in the finance sector came from around the world.

For others, the impersonality of London was found disturbing, and here we begin to see some hints on the reasons for return-migrating to be discussed later. Some participants were disorientated by its bustling, crowded nature, by long commutes, and by a sense of loneliness and powerlessness. These sentiments are well captured by the following two quotes:

When I came here it was all new and exciting... After a while, however, I got tired of all the commuting... And you have to be on your guard all the time, all the time you have to achieve... all the time there is someone who competes with you for your position. Because you have no support system, family and all that. You have to manage all the time on your own, and that is very stressful (Mari, 30, Estonian).

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 never feel so lonely in Estonia as you do in London... I miss certain routines we have in Estonia... going skiing every weekend [in winter], the sauna evenings (Elisa, 28, Estonian).

For many other participants, however, it was the cultural and lifestyle attractions of living in London that held the overwhelming appeal. Not only the ‘elite’ culture of art, theatre and opera, but also London’s open mentality, space for alternative lifestyles, its pubs, clubs and varied music scene were all favourably compared with home-country societies, repeatedly characterised as boring, provincial, narrow-minded, racist and homophobic. For Ann (29, Estonian), it was high culture that made her a fan of London:

I love it that London has so much culture. I really love visiting the theatre, concerts, ballet; for me it is perfect [living here]. I have seen so many famous actresses... and really great shows. Something is happening all the time. That is the reason I am a fan of big cities, I need these opportunities.

Maija, the jazz aficionado introduced earlier, articulated a devastating critique of her home-country society, as well as waxing lyrical about the jazz scene and her job as a music teacher in London.

I just cannot stand that narrow-mindedness in Latvia, narrow minds, blinkered eyes, everything is small in these people’s minds. I really felt it so suffocating in Latvia... I really like the ‘London mentality’, people here are so open-minded, I really loathe racism, this is one of the reasons I truly dislike Latvia. I am a jazz musician... half my friends here are black.

[...]

I have my relatives, I love my Latvian friends, we are in touch through the internet, I have not lost contact with Latvia but I don’t miss Latvia because I am doing five times better here. I like to go to my students [to their houses to teach guitar]; this is how I have learned so much about different places in London... beautiful places like Hampstead. And I have such interesting students – French, Japanese – I would not have these opportunities in Latvia.

It seems that Maija has no plans to leave London, and certainly not to resettle in Latvia. But how about the rest?

Perspectives for the future

In the final section of the interview, the research participants were encouraged to talk about their plans for the future – specifically their thoughts about whether, and when, to return to their country, as opposed to settling long-term in London. For most participants there was huge uncertainty and ambiguity about the future, reflected in some cases by a reluctance even to

discuss it. A range of perspectives was evident; but we must also remind ourselves of one of the adages of migration research – that people’s stated intentions about future migratory moves do not necessarily correspond to the reality that eventuates. Their plans change over the life course and with other changing circumstances. The classic manifestation of this is the so-called *myth of return* (Anwar 1979), whereby migrants constantly talk and behave as if they will return, but in fact never do. The return is repeatedly postponed until it never happens. Generally there are very logical reasons why the return does not take place: better employment and income opportunities in the destination country; superior health and welfare services; and, often the clincher, the birth, education and socialisation of the second generation in the host society, which ultimately ‘roots’ the migrant generation there too. Even when the migrants reach the end of their working lives, the ‘return of retirement’ (Cerase 1974) is stymied because of the firm emplacement of children and grandchildren in the destination country.

We found little evidence of the classic myth of return amongst our participants. They expressed ambivalence, for sure, but this was more related to the recency of their arrival and their still-early life-stage – mostly singles without children; those who had partners and spouses were somewhat more certain about their ‘stay-or-return’ decision, either way. What we found instead was a rather widespread *intentional unpredictability* about the future: a key feature, according to Engbersen and Snel (2013: 34), of the migratory habitus of this ‘new generation’ of intra-European migrants and of the wider phenomenon that these authors characterise as ‘liquid migration’.

Some of our participants quoted above have already given indicators of their future intentions in the interview extracts presented in earlier sections of the paper. Vytautas, our first case-study, was a ‘target migrant’ who had migrated to London to save money for a flat back in Lithuania, and had subsequently returned there. At the other end of the spectrum, two of the Latvian participants, Katrina and Maija, signalled that they were extremely unlikely to return: Katrina because she was already living in England for twelve years and had a high-earning job which she knew she could not replicate in Latvia; and Maija because of her passion for jazz and teaching music in London, and her rejection of ‘small, boring, racist’ Latvia.

The proclivity to return seems to hinge around the balance between career progression on the one hand, and plans to settle down and have a family on the other. Santa (female, 23, Latvian) had initially contemplated returning to Latvia, but rather quickly realised that her long-term future lay in London, a decision confirmed every time she visited Latvia and saw the downsides of the country’s economy and society. She had originally travelled to England to visit a friend who was studying at university; she decided to come back as a labour migrant (‘doing typical guestworker jobs’) in order to take a degree at the same university as her friend. After graduation, she works in advertising, and had tried to get a job back in Latvia.

I was trying to get a job in Latvia, distributing my CV; I thought I could be a brand manager for some big company. I got offers but the salary was 400 lats per month (about £500). I understood that, actually, there is no choice... I just have to stay in London where I can see my career going up and up.

Santa also described the negative side of her ‘duty’ visits to Latvia. Her boyfriend is British of Arab heritage – ‘for elderly aunties in Riga this is like the end of the world’. Santa’s case also illustrates another common outcome: people in ‘mixed’ marriages and relationships (ie. with partners who are not from their home country) are much less likely to return. Santa also reacted

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 his final remark, Reinis also brings us back to the key issue of economic and regional peripherality which underpins our broad analysis of recent Baltic migration trends, and in fact those of other peripheral European countries in the post-crisis, post-enlargement era. We reconsider this, and other conceptual framings outlined earlier, in our concluding discussion, now with the benefit of insights from our empirical material.

Conclusion

Go to any restaurant in Tallinn, Riga or Vilnius, choose a table near a group of 20s and 30-somethings and eavesdrop their conversations, which will almost inevitably be about studying and working abroad, with the experiences of those who have done this eagerly lapped up by their table-mates. They will not use words such as core, periphery, escalator region, liquid migration or life-stage transition, but the more vernacular referents will be there, scattered in their conversations.

In the transcripts of the participants’ narratives too, we find plenty of references, either direct or, more often, indirect to the main concepts underpinning our analysis in this paper. When explaining their reasons for migrating to London (research question one) and their reasons not to return (research question three), they made frequent allusion to the small and provincial nature of their home country’s economy and cultural world-view, contrasted with the perceived boundless opportunities of London as a core node of the European and global economy. They were grateful for the geopolitical (EU accession) and free-movement provisions of the past decade which enabled them to migrate and find jobs, often very good ones. Only a small minority were bitter about being edged out by the recession. In that sense they are the living embodiment of the neoliberal migration agenda of allowing workers to migrate to where the work is, especially if it is a question of high-productivity labour realising its productive potential abroad, as opposed to remaining unemployed or underemployed at home. Zimmermann (2014: 7) writes that Eastern Europeans ‘actually did a big favour for Europe at large’ by migrating in such large numbers. He goes on to say that the crisis was a ‘blessing in disguise’ in that it unblocked the migratory potential of the economically weak countries on the periphery of Europe (2014: 10).

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 from beneficial for the peripheral region, which runs the risk of demographic loss and brain drain. Whilst some participants made passing reference to this problem, their main focus on their own lives and experiences generally screened out reference to these wider structural questions. But in any critically informed discussion of youth migration dynamics in Europe, this has to be taken into account, not only in the Baltic states but also in countries such as Portugal, Greece, Italy, Romania and Bulgaria (Williams 2009). As the Baltic states ease themselves out of recession, there may be a shortage of highly educated young workers with the right skills to push the economy forward. With emigration and a low birth rate combining to shrink the population, there are concerns of a demographic implosion. Since 2000, the population of Estonia has shrunk by 5 per cent, that of Latvia by 10 per cent, and Lithuania by 13 per cent.

This population decline can be potentially staunched by three things: an upturn in the birth rate, the return migration of recent emigrants, or immigration from other countries. The birth rate option is unlikely in the short term, given that so many young adults, potential parents, are abroad. Immigration remains at very low levels and runs up against these countries' strongly ethno-nationalist politics, shaped by historic antagonisms against the Russian-speaking minority (Woolfson 2009). The third option, return migration, takes us to the third question underpinning this paper. Our interview evidence does not give us a clear answer to the question about return. Whilst some participants saw themselves as permanently uprooted and never able or willing to return, largely because of economic and lifestyle reasons, others could not foresee a future in which they would not return at some stage. Within our 20s and 30s cohort, we noted a 'young adult transition' or a process of adult 'becoming' (hence, not yet complete) – from an individualised lifestyle, with few family obligations, to a life-stage which combined thoughts on family formation with a possible return to the home country. Here the experience of Ireland, another small peripheral EU country, is interesting. The 'Celtic tiger' economy of the period between the mid-1990s and 2008 corresponded with substantial immigration (from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia) and a return flow of mostly highly-educated emigrants who had left in the 1980s. It is too early to speak of the Baltic tigers, but there are some indicators in our interview data of the potential for return, reflecting the open-ended, 'liquid' nature of these migrations, characterised by individuality, spontaneity, free-movement legality and 'intentional unpredictability' (Engbersen and Snel 2013). The Irish example demonstrates the relevance of policy and an encouraging attitude towards returning migrants who are made to feel welcome and needed in the (then) booming economy. Such a positive, active policy towards (potential) return migrants has yet to be demonstrated by the Baltic countries, although there are some signs of this in Estonia.

After this discussion of the broader conceptual foundations of our empirical data, we round off by revisiting our three main research questions, and making suggestions for further research. *Question one* was about reasons for young-adult migration from the Baltic states. We found that economic considerations were paramount, but that these were often interwoven with more personal reasons to do with self-development, lifestyle and metropolitan culture. Migration was seen by many as an 'adventure' and the life-course importance of learning better English was often mentioned. We found Fielding's (1992) notion of London as an 'escalator region' highly relevant when applied to graduates from the Baltic countries, although there

remains an open question as to whether and when they will step off the escalator and where this will take them.

The *second question* probed their employment experiences in London and other aspects of life there, and was linked to ideal-type characteristics of their labour-market and class positions as low-skill labour migrants, Eurostars, or something in-between, now often called ‘middling transnationalists’ (Conradson and Latham 2005b). We found evidence of all three. Eurostars à la Favell (2008) were often the children of wealthy or even ‘super-rich’ parents who were prominent in business, politics or the intellectual life of their home countries. Some participants moved straight into well-paid jobs in London, but others experienced an employment transition from an initial period in low-grade service jobs to a better and often graduate-level job, usually after a few months, or whilst a relevant qualification or improvement in English was achieved. In addition to the economic and career benefits of working in London, participants also talked about their social and cultural lives. They were appreciative of the cultural attractions of London and its openness to different lifestyles, but many also found the city impersonal and stressful. This led some respondents to think of their stay as temporary, leading to part of the answer to the *third question*. On the whole, uncertainty and ambivalence surrounded their thoughts about the future, but there were indicators of a desire to return to the home country when anticipating a later or soon-to-happen stage of life partnership and family formation. The decision to return, however, is not necessarily irrevocable. One of the features of what we have termed ‘easy transnationalism’ is that return does not have to be permanent. If things do not work out as planned, there can be the possibility of a ‘second return’ to the UK or perhaps a re-emigration elsewhere.

To properly answer the third question would need a broader survey, based on a larger-N questionnaire, and this is one suggestion for further research. Given the current demographic trends and projections for these countries, return migration of young adults is a crucial variable, both to restore ‘lost’ population and to boost the flagging birth rate. Such a survey would also enable us to further develop the comparative aspect of the research and tease out differences between the ‘triplets’. Gender contrasts, too, need further analysis. On the whole, we found careerist males more oriented to staying on in London, whereas females talked more about returning, but this simplistic generalisation needs further exploration. Finally, issues of identity are yet to be explored. How are evolving identities articulated in the light of migration? Does the experience of migration loosen the predominant ethno-nationalism of specific Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian identities, and how does this identity change express itself – a common Baltic identity, or something broader such as Nordic/Scandinavian, or European, or cosmopolitan/global?

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