

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

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Abstract

This paper examines recent migration from three little-studied EU countries, the Baltic states, focusing on 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. A key objective of this paper is to rejuvenate the core-periphery structural framework through the theoretical lens of London as an ‘escalator’ region for career development. We add a necessary nuance on how the time dimension is crucial in understanding how an escalator region functions – both in terms of macro-events such as EU enlargement or economic crisis, and for life-course events such as career advancement or family formation. Our findings indicate that these 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, escalator region, core-periphery, transnationalism

Introduction

Young, highly-educated Europeans are continuously on the move, travelling, studying and working in other European countries. London stands out as the single most important destination for highly-educated young people, within the UK, Europe-wide and beyond.¹ It is both a global centre of finance, culture and lifestyle, and, despite the UK’s political stance of 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). Many young people see a move to London as a rite of passage en route to completing their transition to ‘full adulthood’, traditionally conceived as the life-stage of marriage/partnership and establishing their new family ‘home’.

This paper’s geographical focus on migration from the EU’s little-studied north-eastern or Baltic periphery is one claim to originality, but there are several other innovative features of our analysis. First, we want to revisit and nuance Fielding’s (1992) notion of London as an escalator region and the linked theoretical concept of Europe’s core-periphery structure (Seers et al. 1979). Second, to these essentially spatial notions we introduce a time dimension related

¹ Even the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum, with its surprising result of a 52% majority to leave the EU, revealed that 70% of London’s voters were in favour of remaining open for the free movement of people, goods, services and capital.

to landmark political and economic events in Europe. Two of these stand out: the 2004 enlargement which brought the three Baltic republics, 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. The third, post-Brexit reality is yet to unfold. When it comes to the time dimension in individual lives, we explore how migration to London interfaces with life-course transitions, including the complex process of ‘becoming’ an adult (Worth 1999).

The final key-concept we deploy to frame our analysis is what we call easy transnationalism. The transnational optic has become widespread in studies of international migration, but within the European context of free movement, lubricated by minimal institutional and cultural barriers to travel and migration, especially for young people, maintaining a multi-local, cross-border lifestyle is rather easy (Parutis 2011). ‘Easy’ transnationalists are also to a large extent ‘middling’ or ‘everyday’ transnationalists (Conradson and Latham 2005a) – that is to say neither high-roller global business elites nor low-skill labour migrants. However, we see them as a subset of the middling transnationalists first written about by Conradson and Latham (2005b) in the context of New Zealanders in London, since intra-EU migrants are favoured by geographical proximity and the easy back-and-forth nature of their movements. Yet another label for this intra-EU movement is ‘liquid migration’ (Engbersen and Snel 2013) – a continuous, revolving mobility carried out by young individuals rather than families, and characterised by a migratory habitus of ‘intentional unpredictability’.

With these multiple contexts in mind, and using empirical material from 78 in-depth interviews with young, highly-educated Balts in London, this paper aspires to answer three research questions.

1. Why do young graduates from the Baltic states migrate to London?
2. How do they describe their working lives 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?

We organise the paper as follows. In the next section we give some background on the Baltic states. Then, bearing in mind the three 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 heart of the paper is made up of three sections on empirical findings, one on each of the three research questions. The conclusion sums up the main findings and relates them to 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 somewhat detached sense of superiority under Soviet rule (Herrschel 2007: 35).

After the restoration of their independence in 1991, the three countries launched their journeys towards EU membership. Amongst the current 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 (Piirimäe 2012).

Following independence, all three countries pursued a neoliberal economic path and extensive privatisation, which led to increased socio-economic inequality. The period since EU accession in 2004 has witnessed three economic phases, each lasting 3-4 years. High economic growth (upwards of 10% 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 accession states) gave young people the chance to travel freely and improve their financial status by taking 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. 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. Steep GDP decline followed, and unemployment skyrocketed. Table 1 gives the figures for total and youth unemployment for the three key years before (2007), at the height of (2010), and since (2013) the crisis. Total unemployment peaked at 17-20% in 2010; the youth rate was roughly twice as high. The youth unemployment figure had more or less halved by 2013, but still remained significantly above the 2007 level for all three countries. The ‘rescue package’ involved implementing austerity measures: cutting salaries in the public sector by 20-30%, and 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

	2007	Total %			Youth % (<25)		
		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	

Source: Eurostat

After the crisis, recovery was swift: already in 2011, Estonia’s annual GDP growth was 8.3%, with Lithuania at 5.9% and Latvia 5.5%, while across the EU the average was only 1.5%.

Interpretations of the Baltic recovery vary, however. On the one hand the Baltic states were held up by EU economic planners as models of ‘responsible’ reaction to the challenges of the crisis (in marked contrast to what unfolded in Greece). On the other hand, a more critical interpretation 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 welfare and benefits, with many forced to emigrate to survive (Sommers and Woolfson 2014). In the post-crisis years, the ideological purchase of neoliberalism strengthened, further transforming both values and behaviour. In short, individuals were to take full responsibility for their wellbeing; and by emigrating, young people from the Baltics have taken this into their own hands.

Despite their shared histories and economic similarities, the three Baltic states are not a closely integrated block, even if their small populations would indicate potential for combined 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 coping 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. However, the Russian population has 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 constitutes 26% of the total in Latvia, 25% in Estonia, and 6% in Lithuania. The Russian presence and influence remains a source of unease in the Baltic states, especially after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and fostered armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. 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 in 2014, 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; for Estonia it is neighbouring 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. As a rather poor substitute, we list the National Insurance Number (NINo) registrations for the decade 2004-14: Estonia 20,998, Latvia 152,339 and Lithuania 278,375. For all three groups, young adults (18-34 years) constitute nearly four-fifths of the total.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 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,

² It should be stressed that the NINo data are a highly approximate measure of immigration. Not all migrants acquire a NINo, and departures do not necessarily de-register.

not least through the migration trajectories of highly educated youth and their transnational lives and plans for the future.

Theoretical contexts

The Baltic states' recent intense experience of emigration represents an amalgam of 'old' and 'new' migration concepts. On the one hand is the rationale of free-market migration. Economists such as Zimmermann make 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 Brexiteers' arguments against immigration and opinion polls' findings that immigration is 'bad' for the economy because of the perceived drain on welfare (Dustmann and Frattini 2014).⁴

On the other hand recent migration flows, such as those from the Baltic republics and elsewhere in Europe, are a reprise of another theoretical frame, which stands in direct opposition to neoclassical and neoliberal economics. This is the core-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 book of Seers et al., *Underdeveloped Europe: Studies in Core-Periphery Relations* (1979). With its roots in political economy, 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; Nikolinakos 1975). 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, mass media and geopolitics in a straitjacket of unequal power relations.

In his essay on the characteristics of the European periphery, Selwyn (1979: 37-39) listed the following key elements:

- Lack of effective control over resources. The main economic decisions are either taken by the core countries or by multinationals headquartered there.
- Lack of innovation.
- Weak internal linkages within the periphery.
- Information flows within the periphery and from the periphery to the core are weaker than those from the core to the periphery.
- Migration flows are from the periphery to the core, dictated both by 'push factors' from the periphery and by the labour needs of the core.

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

³By EU10 we mean the ten Central and East European countries which joined the EU in 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) and 2007 (Bulgaria, Romania).

⁴ But, at the final count, such economic calculations proved ineffectual against the more ruthless and emotive (and highly dubious) message about 'too many immigrants'.

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 by Seers et al. (1979) and Selwyn (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 interview material presented later. Where the Baltic countries differ from their Southern European precedents is their small size and hence vulnerability to economic instability and demographic decline. Smallness is thus a reinforcing characteristic of these countries' peripherality.

Embedded within the spatiality of core-periphery thinking, but with a different set of logical precepts based on life-course and geographically differentiated labour markets, is the conceptual model of the 'escalator region' (Fielding 1992), which links employment and career development with spatial mobility. 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) found 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. Conradson and Latham (2005b) found that the career-boosting escalator effect applies to many New Zealanders, 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' of travel, adventure and exposure to new cultures, the escalator effect is less relevant. Finally, 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.

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) EU countries fit into this typology? Migrants from the Baltic states do not have a clear image in the eyes of British society; rather they are almost 'invisible', especially in London where they are 'lost' within the wider European and multicultural mix. 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 2005a) – in class and employment terms interposed between the privileged transnational elite on the one hand and manual-worker migrants on the other. However, their employment profiles are generally fluid: initially constrained by poor or mediocre English and their need to quickly find work, they first take low-level jobs, but many are subsequently able to transition to better jobs after a few months or years (Parutis 2011a).

As noted in the introduction, Conradson and Latham's (2005a, 2005b) pioneering definition of 'middling' or 'ordinary' transnationalism was applied to middle-class New Zealanders in London, who are very far from home and hence unlikely to visit frequently. Theirs is a 'difficult' transnationalism, sustained by the strength of social networks and virtual communication media. Baltic migrants are just a short, and usually cheap, hop away on a budget flight, and thus we denote them as 'easy transnationalists' (cf. Ryan et al. 2015: 199). They are equally easily able to match standard definitions of transnational migrants – people who maintain multi-stranded social, kinship and economic relations across borders, linking together their communities of both origin and destination (Glick Schiller et al. 1995).

Employment-related transitions such as those mentioned 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 ruptures, for example, by redundancy, illness or other unforeseen family or life circumstances (Hörschelmann 2011). Alongside this economic and demographic framing, other transitions, more cultural in nature, relate 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. 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 'futuraity' 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.

Life-stages and life-courses, which have received renewed interest amongst geographers and other social scientists researching migration (Bailey 2009; Collins and Shubin 2015), are part of a wider theoretical excursion into the role of time in migration (Cwerner 2001; Shubin 2015), which also resonates throughout our analysis. For Baltic migrants in the London region, several temporal dimensions, at various scales, are seen to operate. These range from the opening up of a 'time-space of possibilities' for free movement and employment after 2004 (Lulle and King 2016) and the extra stimulus to outmovement provoked by the economic crisis and austerity (Sommer and Woolfson 2014); to the biographical time of the ongoing migration experience and its employment transitions and 'self-development' projects (Parutis 2011); to, ultimately, a search for settled stability.

Summing up, our theoretical scaffold ties together a wide range of complementary, but also some conflicting, concepts, models and ideologies, which our Baltic case-study evidence helps us to combine and reconcile. As we shall see in the empirical data, Baltic migrants' motivations, rationales and experiences reflect a synergy of influences: neoliberal free movement of labour under conditions of easy transnationalism combined with a periphery-to-core spatial pattern; the move to escalator-region London dovetailing with biographical transitions through the young-adult phase of 'becoming'; and all of this against a temporal

backcloth of key events including EU accession, economic crisis, austerity and (partial) recovery.

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 member of the authorial team,⁵ 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. A feature of all interviews was their open, interviewee-led nature, allowing each participant to elaborate on what they considered important.

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, longer. Given the age, life-stage and mobile/migrant status of the participants, most were unmarried 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, and social media. Standard ethical procedures were observed: provision of an information sheet, 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. 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. For instance, it could be that the less successful migrants might be hidden from our snowball-based interview networks, including those whose sense of non-achievement has led them to return home. 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. Our thematic analysis of the interview narratives

⁵ Estonians were interviewed by Saar, Latvians by Lulle and Lithuanians by Parutis. King's role was to bring the three studies together within a theoretically informed comparative analysis and to lead-author the paper.

revealed rather consistent patterns for all three national groups although not, of course, for every single migrant. The most commonly cited reasons were 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). 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 place where one could test oneself and realise one's true developmental potential. This has a clear time lens 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.

Another narrative trope 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' ethno-cultural 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 partner, the need to escape a difficult family situation, or migration out of pure curiosity.

More details on motives are now given through the examples of individual case-studies which we also relate to the theoretical contexts outlined earlier.

Most interviewees prioritised the economic rationale for their migration to London. Here, we find three distinct pathways to the move. There are those who were already employed but frustrated by the low salaries and lack of career prospects at home; those who had lost their job, often as a 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.

Well, I finished my studies and wanted to have some sort of start in life... I wanted to make some money, 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 achieve on a Lithuanian salary. It is also often 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 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. You 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. If you 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 ‘you 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 two quotes, 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. 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 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, narrative evidence in the interviews revealed the participants’ perceptions of their Baltic homeland as a peripheral region beset by lower incomes and limited opportunities due to the smallness of the economy and the ‘truncated’ nature of the labour market, especially for specialised and professional jobs.

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 reflect culture, lifestyle and personal motives. 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'.

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 very little 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.

Life and work in London

Given that, for most participants, economic factors were paramount, many interviewees talked at length about their working lives since migration. Frequent comparisons were made with the difficult conditions in their home countries. Seeking employment in London was not just about economic pay-off, but also about building up valuable work experience, which could either be taken home upon return, or used to progress their careers in the UK or internationally. Frequent reference was made to new 'cultures of work' – more open and meritocratic. 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.

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. While some had been able to line up 'plum' jobs before arrival (like Renars, above), access to good jobs usually took place via two other routes. The first was the strategy of enrolling for university study in London/UK, where usually a 'top' university was targeted as the bridge to a successful career launch. The second route, the most common, was to move to London to find lower-skilled interim work in order to build contacts, improve language fluency, and understand the system, and then move up to a better job. The following case-study illustrates some of these points. Ieva (female, 27, Latvian) 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 in the class of 'middling transnationals' (Conradson and Latham 2005a) and exemplifies the trajectory of upgrading from 'any job' to a 'better job' described by Parutis (2011). 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), who here describes her lucrative job in emerging markets in the City:

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 many years in England and her elite 'British' education at a top London university 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 highly 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 London's bustling, crowded nature, by long commutes, and by a sense of loneliness and powerlessness. These sentiments are well captured by the following quote:

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).

However, for many other participants, it was the cultural and lifestyle attractions of 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 – in other words, as culturally peripheral. 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 harsh critique of her home-country society, as well as waxing lyrical about the music scene 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 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.

Perspectives for the future

In the final section of the interview, 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. A range of perspectives was evident but for most

interviewees there was huge uncertainty and ambiguity about the future. 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 according to 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.

Participants 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.

Some of our participants quoted above have already given indicators of their future intentions in the interview extracts presented earlier. 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 unlikely to return: Katrina because she had a high-earning job which she could not replicate in Latvia; and Maija because of her passion for jazz.

The proclivity to return seems to hinge around issues of time and transition – the balance between career progression on the one hand, and plans to settle down and have a family on the other. Those participants who look to a future where they will settle down with a partner and children, expressed unease about whether the UK is the best place for this. 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 [meaning 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!

From our sample, it appears 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 adopted more ‘Western’ attitudes, for instance regarding marketing and fiscal transparency (Sippola 2014).

However, ‘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. Amongst the locations mentioned for this possible onward migration were New York/USA, Singapore and the Gulf States, or, closer to 'home', Sweden. Pondering his future, Reinis (male, 25, Latvian) 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' 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 in the post-enlargement era. We reconsider this, and other theoretical framings outlined earlier, in our concluding discussion, now with the benefit of insights from our empirical material.

Concluding discussion

We now revisit our research questions and findings, and interpret them in the light of our constellation of conceptual frames, namely the core-periphery model, the notion of the escalator region, the refinements to the transnational lens which we thought most relevant ('middling' and 'easy' transnationalism), and the multi-layered framing of time – geopolitical, economic and biographical.

When explaining their reasons for migrating to London and their reasons not to return, participants made frequent allusion to the peripheral nature of their home country's economy and cultural world-view, contrasted with the perceived 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 which enabled them to migrate and find jobs. Only a minority were bitter about being edged out by the recession. In that sense our participants 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 on low incomes at home. Zimmermann (2014: 7) writes that Eastern Europeans 'actually did a big favour for Europe at large' by migrating in such large numbers and even 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).

We also 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. 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. Hence the escalator concept applies not only to career

development and income, but also to lifestyle and self-confidence – a way of accelerating the youth-to-adult transition.

It must be acknowledged that some of the theoretical concepts referred to above, and which are integral to our analysis, do not sit very easily together. The EU's neoliberal philosophy of the free movement of labour reflects a markedly different theoretical stance than the critical political-economy foundation of the core-periphery model, where migrant labour is both the victim and the sustainer of uneven capitalist development. To some extent, the escalator-region concept of Fielding (1992) is the bridge between these opposing theoretical positions. Young, well-educated Baltic migrants are free to move to the place in Europe where they most want to be to enhance their careers, build their self-confidence and experience an exciting metropolitan lifestyle. But in so doing they are reflecting the entrenched spatial unevenness in economic and socio-cultural status between their small, peripheral home countries, and the European and globally dominant core of London. Whether this migration acts to reinforce the core-periphery divide in this particular case, or to ameliorate it by the positive stimulus of a return migration of high-skilled brains, is as yet an unanswered question. Our interview evidence cuts both ways – although we must reiterate that our samples are non-representative. On the one hand, we find cases of migrants returning (or about to return) to their home countries with improved skills and experience which presumably allow them to prosper in ways that they could not have, had they not migrated in the first place. On the other hand, we found some migrants not intending to return to their Baltic homelands, thereby contributing to the ongoing net negative balance of young-adult educated migrants.

Existing major studies on metropolitan economic geography are focused on the complex economic, social and political mechanisms which undergird global-city development (Sassen 2001; Storper 2013). They reference the polarisation of labour markets in cities like London based on the concentration of high-salary elite jobs in business, banking, marketing, media, academia etc., alongside the casualisation of many types of manual and service work, often functionally linked to the exploitation of, but also reliance on, immigrant workers. Wills et al. (2010) refer to this as the 'new migrant division of labour' in London. Baltic migrants, especially those who are highly educated, fit uneasily into the class, ethnic and spatial polarisation of London, since they are not 'visible minorities' originating from the 'Third World', nor do they belong to the more stigmatised Eastern European groups like Romanians or Albanians. Hence their 'middling' or 'ordinary' nature (cf. Conradson and Latham 2005a) seems an appropriate designation.

However, in these important studies of the categorisation of migrant labour in London and other global cities, little reference is made to the home-country contexts – the 'periphery', and the populations remaining there. In any critically informed discussion of youth migration dynamics in Europe, the risk of demographic loss 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). With emigration and a low birth rate combining to shrink the population, there are concerns of a demographic implosion and a shortage of highly educated young workers. Since 2000, the population of Estonia has shrunk by 5%, that of Latvia by 10%, and Lithuania by 13%. Immigration meantime 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 other option is return migration. As already stated, 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.

According to national statistical offices, return migration has been relatively high and stable during recent years, although always well below emigration. The decision to return, however, is not necessarily irrevocable. One of the features of what we have termed ‘easy transnationalism’ and of what Engbersen and Snel (2013) label as ‘liquid migration’, 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 (post-Brexit controls permitting) or perhaps a re-emigration elsewhere. Being educated and further trained in certain highly skilled sectors, such as IT or business studies, can provide an economic advantage for return, and career progression can subsequently be faster in these small-scale labour markets with limited competition for specialised jobs. In socio-cultural terms, return is associated with quality-of-life and nostalgia for cultural roots (see e.g. Barcevičius 2015). The multiplicity of reasons why and when the highly skilled decide to step off the escalator, possibly to step on another in the country of origin, and the collapsing of time for career advancement, would certainly form a new avenue of investigation for the future.

Hence, our evidence on the future perspectives of these migrations and migrants is fully consistent with the fluid open-endedness of ‘liquid migration’, but set against the double temporal template of economic and geopolitical change on the one hand, and biographical and life-stage time on the other. Future plans to stay, return, move on, or shuttle back and forth, are all revealed in our data. However, to fully answer the third research question would need a broader questionnaire-based survey, and this is another 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 more analysis. On the whole, we found career-oriented males more prone to staying on in London, whereas females talked more about returning, but this generalisation needs further exploration. Finally, issues of identity are yet to be explored. 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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