

LATVIAN MIGRANTS' CIRCULAR OR PERMANENT MIGRATION TO NORWAY: *Economic and Social Factors*

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Abstract

This article analyses migration decisions and labour market manoeuvring of Latvian migrants to Norway, as well as the economic and social conditions that influence their choices. How do they adapt to the labour market in Norway? Do they practise circular migration, or do they aim for more permanent settlement? For some circular migrants, 'reinforced' motivation for migration emerges gradually, partly related to differences in working conditions – lower workload, better enforcement of work-safety regulations and opportunities for specialising in their field. Family and networks can influence both return and permanent settlement, depending on whether these are based in the home country or in Norway.

Keywords

Latvia • Norway • Labour migration • Circular migration • Permanent migration

Introduction

The 2004 European Union (EU) enlargement enabled free cross-border movement, opening a new migration regime (see Engbersen, Snel & De Boom 2010; Krisjane, Apsite-Berina & Berzins 2016), with an increase in labour migrants moving from the East to the West (Ciupijus 2011). This article analyses migration decisions and manoeuvring in the labour market by Latvian migrants to Norway – in particular, the economic and social conditions that influence their choices. Our respondents emerge as neither totally 'free' nor totally 'forced' movers (Lundholm *et al.* 2004). They are in many ways rational actors; however, their rationality is defined by the socioeconomic situation in their home country and in Norway.

Latvian migrants seek employment in Norway mainly for economic reasons. Salaries are six times higher in Norway; moreover, after the financial crisis, many Latvians took up

loans; entrepreneurs went bankrupt and people often needed several jobs in order to make ends meet, as well as to afford education for their children. However, working in Norway puts strains on their private lives. Many labour migrants leave family and children behind in Latvia, and long periods with little contact are stressful – for those in Latvia, and for the migrants. Therefore, after a while, migrants often try to get their family to join them, thereby opting for more stable settlement in Norway. The long-term goal is not necessarily permanent settlement: the goal is often to earn enough to repay their loans, start their own business or pay for their children's education.

This study explores the experiences of Latvian migrants in Norway, especially the factors influencing the balance between continued circular migration and more permanent settlement. Here, we contribute to the growing literature on circular and/or permanent migration among labour migrants from Eastern to Western Europe. We ask how Latvian migrants adapt to the labour market in Norway, and whether they continue with circular migration patterns or gradually aim at more permanent settlement. We highlight various aspects related to economy, qualifications as well as strong or weak networks that affect how migrants manoeuvre, as regards the temporality of permanence of their migration and how they adapt to the Norwegian labour market more generally. We begin with a short introduction to previous research and then present our methods and data material.

Latvia–Norway migration and East–West labour migration

Our study concerns labour migrants who come from Latvia to Norway for work. Why is this case of interest? The Latvia–Norway migration has many similarities with other East–West migrations in Europe. However, migration from Latvia to Norway is worth studying, for several reasons. Latvia was hit hard by the financial crisis, experiencing the most severe recession in Europe in the period 2008–2010 (Lehmann, Razzolini & Zaikeva 2017) and ranking third among all Central Eastern European EU Member States in total and recent migration (Hazans 2016: 298; see also Krisjane, Apsite-Berina & Berzins 2016). Due to its low unemployment rate and its not being heavily affected by the financial crisis from 2008 and onwards (Fangen & Mohn 2010), Norway has become a major labour in-migration country, with workers from the European Economic Area (EEA) 'exceeding all OECD countries, except Switzerland, as a share of its population' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2014: 15). Norway is the sixth most popular destination country for Latvian migrants (Hazans & Philips 2011). Nevertheless, whereas labour migrants from Poland and Lithuania are the first- and second-largest immigrant groups in Norway today, Latvians rank only as number 22. (Statistics Norway 2018). That may explain why there has been more research on Polish (e.g. Bygnes & Erdal 2017; Dølvik & Eldring 2008; Friberg 2012a, 2012b) and Lithuanian (Daukšas 2013; Kumpikaitė 2018), than on Latvian, migrants to Norway. However, there are studies of Latvian nurses in Norway (Isaksen 2012) and of Latvian work-agency intermediaries in Norway (Žabko, Aasland & Endresen 2018).

Those who moved Westwards in search of work after the EU enlargement are often characterised as ‘regional free movers’: with the borders now open, they opt for circular and transnational mobility rather than long-term permanent immigration (Favell 2008: 703). Similarly, Pollard *et al.* (2008) found that two-thirds of those migrating from Eastern Europe to the UK intended to stay no more than 1 year. Other researchers describe a step-wise process, where migrants advance from circular migrants with no intentions of settling, to transnational commuters with unclear plans, to migrants aiming at long-term settlement (Friberg 2012a). Recent research on intra-EU migration has moved beyond seeing migration as a singular, unidirectional and permanent process, and towards more ‘complex multidirectional repeated transnational network mobility’ (Pries 2016: 27).

Within the debate on new migration patterns emerging in the post-enlargement EU, scholars have acknowledged the increased importance of circular migration (Engbersen, Snel & De Boom 2010; Favell 2008; Krisjane, Apsite-Berina & Berzins 2016; Pries 2016), typical of labour migrants who can move relatively freely across borders. Studies have examined migrants’ commitments to the sending and receiving countries (see e.g. Dauškas 2013; Engbersen *et al.* 2013; Friberg 2012a, 2012b), push-and-pull effects (Zimmerman 1996), networks (Boyd 1989), aspirations (Creighton 2013), imagination (Halfacree 2004), economic motives (de Jong & Fawcett 1981), stages of migration decision-making (Kley 2011) and thresholds for deciding to move (van der Velde & Naerssen 2015). Most of this research builds on quantitative data, indicating which factors have the greatest impact on migrants’ decision-making (e.g. de Jong 2000, Fouarge & Ester 2009, Galgóczi, Leschke & Watt 2011). There has been less focus on the micro-level, ‘on the lives, experiences, networks and social forms that [...] migration in Europe has taken’ (Favell 2008: 702). That is our aim here.

Unlike studies of East European labour migration to West European countries that view ‘circular’ or ‘temporary’ migrants as qualitatively different from permanent migrants or describe various (step-wise) stages of the migration process (Engbersen *et al.* 2013; Friberg 2012a, 2012b), we argue that the difference between these two categories is more blurred. Consequently, we find the following definition of circular migrants proposed by Newland *et al.* (2008) useful: ‘circular migration denotes a migrant’s continuous engagement in both home and adopted countries; it usually involves both return and repetition.’

Circular migration does ‘not’ mean that the migrant cannot decide whether to stay or move on. Rather, it may be a way of optimising one’s economic, social and personal situation and of taking advantage of opportunities as they appear, in the host or home country (Constant & Zimmermann 2011). It might also lessen the psychological stress of long separation from family members. Further, circular migration may denote strong preferences for frequent locational changes in maximising utility (Constant & Zimmermann 2011)

Favell (2008), Krisjane, Apsite-Berina and Berzins (2016), Pries (2016) and others have noted that circular migration is frequently seen as a win-win option for all sides, at least in the short term. However, there are also critical voices. For example, Glick Schiller (2011: 45–46) underlines that circular migration may entail new forms of exploitation, with labour migrants caught in short-term options.

Important for the decision to continue with circular migration or aim at more permanent settlement are relations to family and peers, in the homeland and in the country where they work. Family and peers are important actors in a 'migration network', which is a composite of interpersonal relations within which migrants interact. Massey *et al.* (1993: 448) define a migration network as '... sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin'. Such networks increase the likelihood of migration by minimising the costs and risks, and they can provide a foundation for the dissemination of information as well as for patronage or assistance (Haug 2008: 588). The availability of social networks in the destination country clearly stimulates migration (Massey *et al.* 1993). Decisions about moving or staying are made in and between groups of people – families not the least (Faist 2010: 69; Fouarge & Ester 2009). Research must consider the individual's role within the family and the social network provided by the family (Haug 2008: 588–589).

Depending on its internal structure, a social network may work as a pull or push factor for migration, in addition to serving as a preventive factor against migration. The impact depends on where relatives and friends are located (sender or destination country) and on relationships within the community (conflicting or encouraging). As de Jong (2000: 309) notes, 'expectations of attained valued goals in an alternative location to the home community along with perceived family norms about migration behaviour are the major determinants of migration intentions.'

Also important are life course changes. According to Kley (2011: 483), 'thinking about leaving [...] is more likely in life course transitions or other phases, in that biographical events scatter daily routines.' People may become more open to migration in situations when old social ties are dissolved and new ones might be established, such as completing studies, or starting a family.

Both social and cultural factors influence whether migration takes place and in what form (permanent or circular), as well as the choice of destination and migrants' experiences in their new environment. Various aspects of the social structure of families influence availability, expectations, motives and incentives regarding migration (Haug 2008). The labour market in the home country vs. that in the destination country also plays a role, as do tax and social security systems (Fouarge & Ester 2009: 54). These patterns emerge in our material also: the financial crisis in Latvia was the main reason for seeking new opportunities in Norway. Whether this migration assumes a circular or a more permanent pattern is heavily dependent on social networks.

Here, we focus on a little-studied migrant group, using qualitative data material that provides access to experiences and feelings. This represents an important supplement to most studies, which are quantitative. Qualitative interviews offer insights into the complex factors influencing migrants' choices. We discuss the various elements motivating circular vs. permanent migration, including economic aspects, work/family balance, social networks and adaptation to the labour market.

Methods and data material

In 2015 and 2016, altogether 34 interviews were conducted with 36 Latvian migrants: 31 individual and three group interviews; two interviews included two participants, and one included three. Twenty-four interviews with 27 informants were conducted in Norway, and nine interviews were conducted with circular migrants in Latvia. Altogether eight respondents had settled more permanently in Norway.

Interviewing was done by two researchers, Norwegian and Latvian by nationality. Ten interviews were conducted in Norwegian, three were in English (either the whole interview or parts of it) and 21 were conducted in Latvian (the mother tongue of one interviewer). All interviews were recorded and transcribed soon afterwards.

Respondents were recruited strategically in order to cover the sectors where Latvian migrants in Norway commonly work: fisheries, farming, catering, public sector, postal services, construction, information technology (IT), health and social care. Respondents were recruited mainly through postings in two Facebook groups for Latvians living in Norway, as well as through personal communication on equivalent social media in Latvia (www.draugiem.lv). This enabled us to select informants living in specific areas of Norway. Some respondents were recruited by the snowball sampling method, starting with the researchers' own networks, contacting persons who knew someone with work experience from Norway.

There were 21 male and 15 female respondents, ranging in age from 22 to 57 years. Most of the men worked in the construction industry; many of the women worked as cleaners or in the health/social service sector – a pattern similar to that found among Polish migrants in Norway (Friberg 2012b: 319). Interviewees varied in levels of formal education, from those with no further education after upper secondary school, to those with vocational education – such as plumber, trucker or construction worker, and to those with tertiary education in, inter alia, the humanities or IT. The majority had upper secondary school or vocational training; only a few had completed further education beyond upper secondary school (e.g. university education). However, once in Norway, migrants found that they could not choose jobs freely and often accepted positions below their qualifications.

In Norway, most interviews were conducted in the Oslo region (within 1 hour travel by public transport from the Oslo City centre), as well as in the north of Norway, namely, in Nordland and Troms counties (chiefly around the towns of Harstad and Sortland). In Latvia, interviews were undertaken in various parts of the country. The choice of places in Norway was related to our wish to include various types of workplaces (work in fisheries being typical of the northern counties); the migrants' place of residence in Latvia was of no significance to this study.

Interviews were semi-structured, but all covered a set of topics defined by the project of which our study was a part: the impact of temporary work agencies for the politics of work, funded by the Research Council of Norway. Interviews covered background information (age, education, family situation, etc.), how they found work in Norway (through contacts, webpages or work agencies), information about their workplace(s) in Norway, salary, work

regulations, etc. and also about their plans for staying, leaving or finding another job in Norway.

Aspects influencing migration patterns

What elements motivate the migration patterns of Latvians who seek employment in Norway? The themes of economic aspects and aspects related to social networks, including work/family balance, emerged when we asked respondents about their reasons for seeking employment in Norway.

Economy and qualifications

Many studies of East–West inter-EU migration in sending and receiving countries indicate that migrants are motivated largely by economic gains (Apsīte-Beriņa 2013; Burrell 2010; Favell 2008; Friberg 2012a, 2012b). Moreover, our interviews show that economic motives are central for both circular migrants and permanent ones, albeit in different ways. For circular migrants, economic motives relate to the fact that they earn more in Norway than they could in Latvia, whereas living expenses in Latvia are significantly lower than in Norway – so they can buy more in Latvia on Norwegian wages. Economic motives are also important when migrants move more permanently because of difficulties getting jobs in their home country.

Economic motives became more urgent during the 2009/2010 economic recession. Loans taken to purchase property had to be paid, construction businesses in Latvia collapsed and many workers became unemployed. Financial factors were also important later, after the situation in the home country had stabilised. Migrants in our study spoke of money as a means for achieving broader goals, such as saving up for studying or accumulating start-up capital for own business.

One male respondent worked for a Latvian building company in northern Norway, as a circular migrant. He had held a middle-level manager position in Latvia but shifted to manual work in the construction industry because of the growing needs of his family. Working abroad – now in Norway, earlier in Germany – was a strategy for providing his family with things not affordable on his Latvian salary:

I have goals in life. While working in Latvia, I couldn't achieve those goals financially. My children are growing. They will need support to learn further at schools. [I came to Norway] solely because of this. (*Male, aged 46, circular migrant, working in construction*)

In the short term, all our informants accepted wages lower than what native Norwegian workers got for the same job. Acceptance of this double wage standard is found also among migrants who have been in Norway for several years but have not decided whether to settle down there. Most respondents acknowledged that they worked for lower wages than

Norwegians. They knew the exact difference in wages and emphasised that their advantage over other workers was that they could do the same-quality work at lower cost. However, in secondary sectors with no labour shortages, migrant workers competed among themselves for cheaper offers.

I haven't worked for less than for 170 kroner [per hour]. That's the lowest I'll take. I don't hope to get more, nor less, but I have to do the work of two or three people, because then I'll have work. (*Male, aged 41, working in construction*)

Getting reliable information is difficult. Some work contracts specify confidentiality regarding wage differences between Norwegians and migrants.

Since Latvian migrants work for lower wages than Norwegians, the need to balance the budget was mentioned in almost every interview. A common strategy involved buying goods like food and clothes on return visits in Latvia and not spending money while in Norway. Circular migrants can easily apply this strategy due to the character of their work and free-movement opportunities in Europe. Saving money also means avoiding all activities in Norway that entail extra expenditures.

Another important strategy for being competitive in the Norwegian labour market is working overtime (see also Friberg 2012a, 2012b). This is closely linked to economic motivations and short-term or unclear future perspectives – and consequently with circular migration. One male informant had secondary vocational training as an electrician. His business in Latvia went bankrupt because of the financial crisis, so he went to northern Norway to earn money. After a while, he managed to repay his loans, but he still needed to work in order to earn enough money to start up a business of his own in Latvia. He realised that Latvians were willing to work for lower wages than Norwegians. Still, he wanted to continue working in Norway, in order to be eligible for minimum pension under Norwegian law.

I've come here, what do I do? Go home at four and watch TV? [...] I came to earn money and don't say no to overtime hours, we all work overtime [...] At four o'clock the Norwegian drops his hammer and he isn't there anymore; already at 15:50 he isn't thinking about work, he is at home or doing private things somewhere else. (*Male, aged 49*)

In general, our respondents, especially those working in the construction sector, held that the low-wage strategy, together with the faster work pace and willingness to work overtime, makes them attractive as workers. For those with families in Latvia, the combination of these strategies opens up another opportunity: to squeeze the number of working days in Norway, so as to have time to be in Latvia together with their families. This strategy could also be used as a tool for income maximisation. Some interviewees work in Norway until their annual income reaches the highest level for which the lowest personal income tax rate is charged; and then they stop working and go back to Latvia until the next fiscal year. This approach allows them to accumulate time to spend with their families, up to 2 months, at the end of the year.

We showed that we could work better than Norwegians. We could work faster, we proved all that, and therefore we were allowed to choose our work schedule freely. We arrived on Saturday and began on Sunday, worked for nine days and went home. We arranged it like this. [...] We let them know when we are going home. That's it, no objections, just go. (*Male, aged 29, working in construction*)

Circular migration may include several weeks of work in Norway, and then a few weeks of rest in Latvia, a strategy that is found also in other studies of East–West migration. For example, Hazans and Philips (2011) find that migrants often have a target, frequently related to buying a car or a flat or repaying a loan. Once this target is reached, they return to their home country.

Work and rest regimes differ among business industries and companies. Circular migration could be initiated from either the employer's or the employee's side. If the circular migration is organised by the employer, the migrant's length of work and rest regimes are set, and the time schedule is known in advance. The employer and employee may also establish a mutual agreement that the 'rest time' in Latvia is solely for recreation, not work. By contrast, when the circular migration is initiated by the employee (migrant), then the length of work and rest regimes depend on the migrant's abilities to fulfil his or her work duties in Norway faster, to have more time to spend in Latvia.¹

Economic motivations can also include the need for security and predictability. This may result from disappointment with labour relations and social welfare provisions in the home country (Galgóczi, Leschke & Watt 2011). This emerged as an important motivation, especially among our female respondents, as well as among permanent migrants in general:

[...] primarily to get a better, more secure future. Because in Latvia, it is so unstable, you don't know what the people in the government will be up to. Suddenly one day they change everything, and you sit there as a pensioner and can hardly survive. That's what I fear. (*Female, aged 27, who had studied Norwegian language and culture before coming to Norway*)

The term 'security', as perceived by our respondents, encompasses a broader meaning, including stability of economy and welfare system, as well as greater internal security in Norway, given perceptions of threat from Russia in Latvia. Individual migration decisions thereby also include a geopolitical motivation.

At their first job, migrants tend to accept less-qualified work, regardless of their background and education (see Galgóczi, Leschke & Watt 2011). For some, this was acceptable, often an informed choice in order to achieve their goals as quickly as possible. Regardless, the main factor here was where the focus of their aspirations was: in Norway, or in Latvia. Those who wanted a future in Norway had to find ways of making their aspirations fit with the realities of Norwegian society – learning the language, reconsidering their values and gradually moving on to new jobs. For those who wanted to return to Latvia, it was different: they did not feel motivated to learn the language; if they changed jobs, they found work in sectors where language skills were not required. They focussed on returning to Latvia and making a better future for themselves and their families there.

Initially, most respondents got jobs in the secondary, less-qualified sector (Engbersen, Snel & De Boom 2010; Galgóczy, Leschke & Watt 2011). Although this may have entailed downgrading, not everyone experienced this as entirely negative. By accepting less-qualified jobs, migrants achieved their goals sooner than if they had waited for a better position.

One well-educated male respondent decided to shift from being medium-level manager in Latvia to construction worker in Norway because of the growing financial needs of his family. He saw this as the fastest way to achieve his goals. Other well-educated respondents found that they could not find jobs in line with their previous experience, so they had to start all over again – also accepting jobs far below their qualifications (see also Favell 2008).

Initially my ambitions were really big – with my higher education, I wasn't about to work in some shop and wash the floors. When I left Latvia, I thought that I could do all kinds of work. But it wasn't like that! It does not happen like that here. Everything happens slowly here, nothing will go without local acquaintances and I had simply not been long enough in Norway. Half a year is nothing for Norway. I don't know the social life here, or the labour market... In principle, I do not know anything! No matter what my CV says. (*Female, aged 36*)

In general, skilled workers with advanced qualifications from Latvia (e.g. master craftsman) would accept jobs of lower complexity in Norway than what they had before. However, skilled workers in industries such as construction, car repair or catering found approximately similar work and were satisfied.

Most respondents who had settled in Norway had found new jobs later on, although they had been satisfied with the first ones. They emphasised that being able to find another job involved getting to know the local labour market and employers' preferences, establishing contacts with Latvians with longer experience of Norway and with better language skills. Knowledge about local communities and learning at least basic Norwegian were considered important. The same approach was used by those planning to settle down in Norway. Before terminating the contract with an employer that provided temporary jobs, they established contacts with the local community to find new work. We found a few instances of migrants moving within Norway to find work more in line with their own qualifications (Cairns 2014: 6).

Work in Norway could facilitate re-evaluation of previous work experience and attitudes towards regulations and joining unions. For example, those who aspired to stay re-evaluated the need to join a trade union. Trade unions exist in Latvia, but membership rates are quite low. Noting the power of trade unions in Norway, some respondents decided to join. They explained that in Latvia, trade unions cannot achieve anything important (merely organising social events, participating in some negotiations, etc.), but they realised that in Norway, trade unions matter, and employers take into account their views. Likewise with work safety standards: these exist in Latvia but are rarely enforced. In Norway, they found that work safety standards must be taken into account, there was no way to avoid

them and thus they started to think and act differently. Some interviewees claim that they have now changed their attitudes towards work safety standards.

Work isn't physically hard anywhere, because you don't have to lift things, there are lifts and elevators for everything, and heaven forbid that someone should see you trying to lift up a patient [...] Then people will scream – what are you doing, be careful with your back, are you crazy? So we do what they say. *(Female, aged 40, working as a nurse)*

Thus, Latvian migrants have an adaptation strategy that implies accepting work for which they are overqualified – but they also feel safer, supported by trade unions and stricter work regulations.

Family, peers and work intermediaries

Social networks, both formal and informal, are important as push and pull factors for migration. As research among Polish migrants in the UK has shown, having social networks in the home country can keep the possibilities open for returning, whereas strong networks in the receiving country can facilitate permanent settlement (White & Ryan 2008). We noted many examples among our respondents of how family and social networks serve as pull factors. Relatives and friends may actively promote and channel migration to their own places of residence by facilitating adjustment to the new location, e.g. job search, material support, encouragement and establishment of new social ties. Especially, migrants who were relatively satisfied with their jobs in Latvia explained that they chose precisely Norway because of an offer made by a relative, a friend, an acquaintance or a former business partner. The latter offers are based on previous experience of professional cooperation, which indicates that such a person is good in his/her line of work. This is also part of the employees' attraction strategy, how some migrants develop and maintain their own position in Norway by empowering their social networks.

An acquaintance of one of my colleagues offered me a place in Norway. I'd already thought about going to Sweden, but nothing too serious. He said he knew someone who needed a painter. I telephoned, and was told that I could come already the next day [...]. When I went there, there was another guy, recruited in exactly the same way as me. *(Male, aged 44)*

Informal contacts, such as a middleman or a work (or temporary) agency, can be important in facilitating a smooth entry into the Norwegian labour market (see also McCollum *et al.* 2013; Žabko, Aasland & Endresen 2018). Some respondents felt that they could not go to Norway on their own: they knew no one there and knew nothing about Norwegian society. Using a middleman became their way 'in', although it had its costs at the time.

In fact, this was unofficial and illegal. But there was a ‘man in-between’. And in the company where my husband got work, they didn’t know about it. The arrangement was for him to give half of the money to this man in-between. (*Female, 28, whose husband used the services of an intermediary*)

In some sectors, especially construction, a Latvian employer has business relationships with Norwegian companies and acts as an intermediary for his employees. This role is related to what Cairns (2014: 29) calls a ‘movement multiplier’: [...] through acting as a role model for others; this may be at an imaginative level, via discourse in becoming a mobility “case study”, or in more concrete terms through offering actual practical assistance.’ As seen in the example above, this ‘movement multiplier’ need not be a positive role model or someone offering help to friends: he/she could also be someone who takes advantage of Latvians wanting work opportunities in Norway.

Migrants strengthen existing social ties and establish new ones in order to deal with Norwegian institutions (registration, taxation and benefits) and to find better jobs. They develop new contacts in various ways – at the workplace, in public places (in shops or on the street when hearing a familiar language) and via Internet chat rooms. They establish contacts primarily with Latvians, but also with Lithuanians, but there are indications of competition between workers of different nationalities. Some respondents had received help from Norwegians as well, mostly at their workplace.

One Lithuanian woman helps to do the paperwork, [...] because I don’t know the language, I know some basic words, but [...] talking with state institutions is very hard for me. [...] Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians work there and those who are Lithuanians aged 35 to 40, they know Russian, then we talk to them in Russian, communicate, help each other. Then they gave me the number of that Lithuanian woman, who helped to fix things for me. (*Male, aged 29, working in construction*)

In addition, having relatives or friends already in Norway can serve as motivation. Without friends or family to help when settling in, finding a job and identifying a place to live, the migrant may have a tough time:

We wanted to move in together [the respondent and her boyfriend], to have a place of our own. But we could get this only if we saved more money. So we thought maybe we should move to England, but it was easier to go to Norway, to my mother. Because then we had a place to live, and things like that. (*Female, aged 22*)

For women, an important reason for migration is unsatisfactory personal life, including lack of balance between work and family life in Latvia, where women have greater family responsibilities than do men (see also Widding Isaksen 2012). For some, wishing to change, perhaps start a new life course period, migration to Norway offers an opportunity to escape difficult circumstances, find another partner or simply have shorter working hours. Norway becomes the choice because work-life is more regulated – sometimes also because other

family members or friends already live there. For instance, one interviewee had married a Norwegian whom she got to know after coming to Norway several times. She had a good job in the pharmaceutical industry in Latvia, so he first moved to live with her. However, her job was so demanding that it was not easy to combine with private life, and she finally decided that it would be better for them to live in Norway:

The pharmaceutical business is very dynamic, fast and in principle requires enormous resources. In the end it interfered with my private life. [...] I had to make a decision, either family or business. I realised that if continuing like this, I couldn't maintain a family [...]. So, I told him, we are moving to Norway. (*Female, aged 36*)

Her description highlights differences between the welfare systems in the two countries. Widding Isaksen (2012) notes that the Latvian welfare state is marked by a gender-conservative ideology. Although women have access to employment and education, social services, maternity benefits etc., young women are afraid to take advantage of them because they may risk losing their jobs. Also our interviews indicated that Latvian women regard the Norwegian social security as better. For several female respondents, more stable and secure working conditions were central to their decision to migrate.

Our respondents varied regarding family life: some had been joined by spouse and children, others not (although all our interviewees had children), and yet others had concluded that they would separate when the spouse could not find appropriate work in Norway and had to return to Latvia. Another reason for divorce was that the migrant had been away from their family for a long time. The break-up of their family also made them more cautious about establishing new relationships. In one situation, migrants try to bring their spouses with them to Norway but find that this does not work; in the other situation, the spouse remains in Latvia, and that separation places increasing strains on the relationship.

For those migrants who lived alone, away from home, maintaining relationships with their families was crucial. In our sample, more men than women had left their family behind in Latvia. However, some older informants (40–50 years) had adult children, and for them, living separately was not so burdensome.

A job offer that makes circular migration possible can be attractive to migrants who do not want to spend long periods abroad and who want to keep close contact with family in Latvia. Some find that they have a lighter workload in Norway than they used to have in Latvia, so circular migration to Norway enables them to spend more time with the family:

The positive thing is that I'm often at home, together with my family. When I worked in Latvia, I was at work from morning till late at night, and I didn't see the children much. Now, when I'm at home for two weeks, I see the kids much more than when I was working in Latvia. (*Female, aged 40*)

This is an example of 'parenthood at a distance', an emerging phenomenon in Eastern Europe (Lutz 2010: 1653), especially frequent among men. Such parenthood is typical of

East–West labour migration, as shown by a study of Polish migrants who divide their time between work in Norway and family in Poland (Bygnes & Erdal 2017: 8).

Migrants developed various strategies for keeping contact with family and dealing with the stresses of being alone. Some established as close a relationship as possible, spending evenings at the PC and using Skype or talking on the phone. A few developed the opposite strategy – keeping a distance between themselves and family, to make it easier to deal with their feelings:

I choose to talk to my wife through correspondence and not Skype, because psychologically it's easier to write than talk. When you talk, there is a bigger chance of getting depressed. When you see that your children are growing up and you aren't there with them, it hits you hard. Then you simply maintain a distance, try to communicate through correspondence. When you go home, you try to compensate for all that, spending time with the children, trying to be the good dad. (*Male, aged 34*)

These circular migrants generally have a clear vision of working in Norway in order to fulfil short- or medium-term economic goals, without needing to settle down. Keeping contact with family living in Latvia is important. These migrants are more critical towards Norwegian society than those planning more permanent settlement. They emphasise differences between Norwegian and Latvian societies – concerning family values, gender roles and values at the workplace – and conclude that they cannot integrate. Several respondents were unaccustomed to what they experienced as strong social control in Norway.

Striving to integrate into Norwegian society was related to the individual's hope for future work and/or life in Norway. This strategy included learning the language, establishing contacts with Norwegians, reconsidering own values and social norms, as well as having Latvian family members move to Norway. Some female informants also mentioned marrying a Norwegian as a way to secure permanent residence. That we found this among women and not among men was probably not accidental. Women argued that they had much to win by marrying in Norway, given Latvia's gender-conservative ideology, which was not a reason mentioned by men.

Marriage to a Norwegian could facilitate integration. One interviewee who had married a Norwegian had the opportunity to concentrate on learning the language full time:

I had saved some money in order to be able to study Norwegian and not go out to work while studying the language. [...] I realised that I would learn the language about half a year with my learning speed and would find a job within a year in the worst-case scenario. (*Female, aged 36*)

Social contact with Norwegians can allow migrants to accept unattractive job offers in order to achieve their long-term aims – learning the language and getting to know the norms and customs of Norwegian society.

[T]he rest is how much you are interested in learning about the daily routine. The main thing is that you really want to learn [...] you must keep asking questions. I told people: 'Sorry, I'm an idiot from Latvia.' I said that I did not understand anything and had them explain to me once again. I played at being from Latvia and not knowing the language well, that I was a beginner and that they would have to help me. (*Female, aged 36*)

One respondent explained that Latvians were like Norwegians in being more introvert than extrovert, and they did not manage to build extensive social networks after moving to Norway. She contrasted this situation to that of Polish migrants, who, because they are Catholics, get an extensive network through the church. She said that Latvians often know only a couple of other Latvians, and it is hard for them to go about getting to know more people, not the least Norwegians. Those aiming at a more permanent stay, however, seem to work more strategically to establish such networks.

Here, we have seen examples of the importance of both strong and weak ties (Granovetter 1973) related to Latvia–Norway migration. Weak ties, such as those with work agencies and middlemen, are important for finding work and getting help with job-related formalities; strong ties, such as those with family and friends, are important for finding a place to live and feeling 'at home'. However, strong ties in Latvia may contribute to return migration or continued circular migration, except when the migrant manages to encourage family and/or friends to move to Norway.

Discussion and conclusions

We have explored the various aspects that influence Latvians' migration processes and adaptation to the Norwegian labour market, as well as what distinguishes circular migrants from those aiming at permanent residence. In our material, the categories of circular vs. permanent migrants are not absolute. Like Skeldon (2010), we find that, for some circular migrants, 'reinforced' motivation for migration emerges after a while. This is partly related to differences in working conditions: circular migrants can be motivated to keep working in Norway because of lower workload, better enforcement of work safety regulations and opportunities for specialising instead of 'doing everything'. These motives also serve as reasons to stay, for those who have already settled in Norway and reflect on their future choices.

This is a qualitative study, which limits the possibilities for generalising – but the trends found in our material are supported by previous research on East–West migration in Europe in general, and Norway in particular. Circular migration is often related to short-term economic motives, such as being able to earn more in Norway than in Latvia, spending as little money as possible in Norway and buying all necessary goods on return visits in Latvia. Friberg (2012a: 1602) finds similar patterns among Polish workers in Norway. Such organisation of work–social life often means long working days in Norway to maximise earnings, combined with not engaging in leisure time activities there, in order to keep expenditures down – and then prioritising socialising when back in Latvia.

Such a strategy has obvious costs, especially related to feelings of belonging and continuity in social life. Continuing with circular migration over time means not becoming integrated, living alongside Norwegian society. In general, leaving family behind and seeing them only on return visits seems more common among men than among women (see also Friberg 2012a: 1956). Maintaining important social ties in Latvia while living in Norway is challenging, particularly for those who have left spouse and children behind. They may develop strategies to make the loss less stressful, for instance by communicating in writing and not via Skype.

This underlines a point made by Skeldon (2010): circular migration is no silver bullet. In addition to the stress of seeing family only on return visits comes the frustration of having to accept jobs below one's qualifications, with less secure working conditions when compared to the case of permanent settlement. Migrants who intend to stay in Norway tend to adapt more to everyday cultural practices, like joining in leisure time activities and getting Norwegian friends.

In our sample, especially those with higher education aim at permanent stay in Norway, as compared to those who continue with circular migration. This is also supported by quantitative research on circular migrants vs. stayers (Engbersen *et al.* 2013: 975). Our sample includes individuals from varying socioeconomic backgrounds – some with no further education after secondary school, some with vocational training and others with higher academic education. All find wages and working conditions in Latvia unsatisfactory. Unemployment, tax issues and inadequate workers' rights in the home country can become push factors for moving to Norway. Most of our respondents came to Norway during the economic recession and felt these issues keenly.

Also important is whether other family members live in Latvia or in Norway. If they live in Latvia, there are strong incentives for choosing circular migration, which enables the migrant to spend more time in Latvia (see also Engbersen *et al.* 2013). However, there could still be a long-term goal of bringing the family to Norway. Hazans and Philips (2011: 16) found that establishing a new family or partnership often leads to permanent emigration.

As shown in earlier research on circular migration, this need not be an either/or choice. Reflection around the advantages of a permanent move is crucial, and temporary movement may be an option when there is strong attachment to family or friends in the home country (Engbersen *et al.* 2010). Similarly, having family, stable work attachment or one's own home in the destination country may encourage permanent migration (Constant & Zimmermann 2010).

Finally, changes in the homeland may spur changes in priorities. If the economic situation and security in Latvia improve, longer-term migrants to Norway might decide to return to Latvia. This would be more a typical migration/return migration situation, as opposed to the circular migration of going back and forth frequently. It remains to be seen whether those who have aimed at becoming integrated into Norwegian society will continue to stay.

Notes

- 1 Norway has strict regulations intended to prevent working more than the prescribed number of hours per day. Transgressions of these rules occur mostly with migrants working in the construction sector and employed directly by private persons.

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