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## Return migration experiences: the case of Central and Eastern Europe

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### Introduction

This chapter considers the specificity or otherwise of migrants' experiences of return. The case study is Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Like other contributions to this volume, the chapter understands return migration as more than merely the end of the migration story. It focuses on that part of the return process taking place in the country of origin. This process is fascinating for qualitative researchers interested in how individuals construct the social world. Returnees understand one set of experiences (often labelled 'reintegration') through the prism of their reflections on experiences in the receiving society. Immediately after return, in particular, they often check whether they made the right decision, comparing the origin country with the foreign one, and weighing up their attachments to particular places and individuals in one country and the other. In the words of Ewa<sup>1</sup> (whom I interviewed in 2011 about her return to Poland) 'I realised I was living in fact in two worlds at the same time. A Polish world and an English world. That I couldn't completely shut the door on that English world.' This dual focus also manifests in their networking: reintegrating into the origin society can be accompanied by a parallel process of maintaining and even extending transnational ties. The phrase 'transnational return' (Anghel et al 2019) captures the idea of how return takes place within this transnational social space.

The fact that scholars around the world find evidence of such behaviour suggests a commonality of return experiences.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, place must matter in shaping return processes. Exactly how it matters can be understood by analysing the features of case study countries or regions. Differences between receiving (i.e. foreign) countries help shape outcomes for returning migrants, as demonstrated for example by Carletto and Kilic (2011) writing about labour market experiences of returnees to Albania from Italy and Greece. However, significant aspects of receiving country experience are often not so much connected with that country *per se* but with the migrant's immigration status and the types of migrant the country attracts. It would probably be true to say that features of the origin/return location are more important than the receiving society in shaping returnees' experiences.

This chapter considers return to CEE, an area currently experiencing considerable geographical mobility, including returns. This makes it a good case study for understanding

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Carling et al (2011: 3) find that reintegration is the most common sub-topic in return migration scholarship. However, this does not seem to be the case with regard to scholarship in English on return to CEE; my impression is that studies of return intentions and motivations are at least as common.

contemporary return migration trends. CEE is itself a diverse region; today, in particular, there exist dividing lines linked to EU membership status – whether a country is an EU candidate or Eastern Partnership member, or outside EU structures. Nonetheless, the common legacy of communist party rule and the 1990s transformation remain important both for the impact of return migration on societies of origin (White et al 2018) and for returning individuals and families, the subject of this chapter. Social change is to some extent always part of the backdrop to reintegration experiences; in CEE, social change has been particularly dynamic in recent decades. This chapter explores patterns of decision-making for return, reintegration, and social remitting within this specific regional context, while also considering how CEE in some ways exemplifies wider mobility trends within the EU and the world today.

‘Reintegration’ is a concept commonly used to understand returnee experiences (King 2000: 18-22). In keeping with my previous research (e.g. White 2017) I define (re)integration as a process of starts, stops and reversals, taking place at different speeds in different domains - cultural, social, economic and political - and involving accommodation by both the (return) migrant and the (origin) society. One difference between integration and reintegration might seem to be that, following Berry (1997), researchers often understand cultural integration as incomplete assimilation. It is an outcome which most migrants prefer (Neto 2010: 222). By contrast, publications about cultural reintegration of returnees often imply that they expect to re-assimilate. ‘Reintegration’ seems therefore to be used as the equivalent of ‘re-assimilation’. However, as King points out (2000: 20), ‘there can be no return to the *status quo ante*’. Neto’s (2010) article about Portuguese adolescents shows they wished to retain social connections with and aspects of the cultural identity of the foreign country where they previously lived: they did not want to ‘shut the door’, to use Ewa’s metaphor. Hence re-assimilation was not their preferred strategy. In fact, all returnees who maintain strong transnational links, as is so easy for many EU citizens, may often experience moments of rebellion against expectations that they conform to origin society norms.

Finally, the term ‘social remittances’ (Levitt 1998) is often used in recent publications to analyse experiences of returnees, often with an eye also to their impact on the wider society. Social remittances research links to older literature on migrants as agents of change (Cerese 1974); this in turn links to literature on migration and development. Returnees can bring back a changed world view, becoming more open and confident – an experience reported by many in CEE (White and Grabowska 2019). Aneta, a Polish returnee from Ireland whom I interviewed in 2019, summed this up with the phrase ‘I’m not afraid of the world’. They sometimes also bring back more specific new ideas, attitudes and skills, which may help or impede their reintegration process.

The chapter is based on a combination of secondary literature and original data. I have tried to include as much information as possible about non-Polish returnees. However, English-language scholarship mostly considers the Polish case, and these publications represent the tip of the iceberg, since there also exist many Polish-language sources. The chapter also draws on my research from 2007-19. I conducted in-depth interviews with 104 Polish return migrants, in/from locations across Poland, and 25 Ukrainians. My projects asked different research questions, and my interviewees had varying reasons to return, but

one common finding was that perceptions about reintegration in the return location (the actual place more than the country) were often linked to specifically post-communist characteristics. Unless otherwise stated, interview quotations in this chapter are from my 2019 interviews in Płock with 25 Ukrainian circular migrants and 14 Polish return migrants. The chapter first examines some characteristics of recent CEE migration which have a bearing on return experiences. I then discuss some other relevant aspects of the environment to which migrants return, and the impact of these on their reintegration experiences, before considering the ability of returnees to socially remit.

## CEE migrants and patterns of return migration

Modern telecommunications and the internet enable migrants across the globe to send information to contacts in their origin country, speeding the formation of informal migration networks. EU citizens additionally benefit from free movement. These opportunities encourage a great variety of mobility aspirations, with regard to destination, duration, regularity and frequency of migration. Many types of CEE citizen are drawn into migration. Although the social complexion of migrant flows from different countries differs to some extent, the mobile CEE population from major sending countries such as Romania, Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania is quite heterogeneous, to the extent that some receiving country populations, such as UK-based Poles, can be considered almost microcosms of society in the country of origin (White et al 2018).

Axes of difference among migrants include age, life-stage, gender, parental status, sexual orientation, educational level, skills, income, social status (at home and abroad), degree and nature of identification with country of origin, and transnational ties while abroad and upon return. Given that each migrant possesses a different bundle of identities, resources and mobility aspirations, return is an individualised process. There is some quantitative evidence about which types of migrant are more likely to return. For example, Anacka et al (2013) show that Poles have returned more often to villages than large cities, probably because circular migrants are more likely to come from villages. Moreh et al (2020: 52-3) argue that CEE men more often return than women, again probably linked to the fact that men are more often temporary migrants, migrating without their families. Duda-Mikulín (2018: 146-7) suggests that Polish women may particularly be expected to return for family reasons, so return is also gendered in this respect.

Migration flows in the 1990s, soon after the collapse of communist regimes, were also mixed. Nonetheless, before 2004 a highly gendered type of circularity – usually by just one parent – typified migration from many countries, especially from smaller and poorer locations. This type of mobile livelihood persisted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, it was common in Germany, which maintained labour market restrictions until 2011 for CEE states joining the EU in 2004. It has typified countries like the Netherlands, with its demand for seasonal agricultural/horticultural labour, and Italy, with many jobs for live-in carers which are attractive to women from poorer locations in CEE. It is widespread today for Ukrainians utilising temporary work permits to Czechia, Poland and Lithuania. However, repeated temporary migration does not only result from structural factors in receiving countries. It

also reflects some specific features of livelihood strategies in postcommunist societies, for example, that it is socially acceptable for middle-aged working-class women to leave their older children to work temporarily in care and cleaning abroad, and that middle-aged parents should support their children's higher education in this fashion (Lapshyna and Düvell 2015: 304, White 2009: 560-1). Return visits can be a rest for circular migrants, but they can also require awkward temporary reintegration adjustments on both sides, as for example Lulle (2014: 136-7) describes with regard to Latvia. Moreover, upon return, the migrant may need to be on the lookout for new opportunities to go abroad, constantly thinking transnationally as they explore 'various destinations depending on emerging opportunities' (Ciobanu 2015: 466, on Romania).

In contrast, migration from CEE to the UK and Ireland at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century involved many childless young people, including city-dwellers. Lifestyle considerations seemed commonly to combine with economic and/or educational motivations, as across Europe more widely (King 2018). A specifically CEE feature of this migration flow was high youth unemployment in some countries at the time: among 25-29 year olds in early 2004 it stood at 24.1% in Poland, 18.9 % in Slovakia, 14.3% in Latvia and 12.1% in Lithuania.<sup>3</sup> Krzaklewska's study of Polish returnees born in the 1980s (2019: 43) refers to 'a generational story of a cohort entering adulthood in the time of Europe opening its borders for Central-Eastern Europeans, thus creating new chances for experiencing youth and capitalizing on the mobility within transitions to adulthood'. She continues: 'The study participants stressed that "going abroad was a distinguishing trait for their generation'."

Young people's plans to stay or return were often open-ended, with some apparently pursuing a strategy of 'intentional unpredictability', while others always meant to return (Eade et al., 2007). Among Parutis's sample of young Poles and Lithuanians it was the most non-conformist in their behaviour – such as LGBT people, and unmarried migrants over 30 – who felt more disinclined to return. As one remarked, by remaining in London 'I definitely spared myself a conventional life' (Parutis 2014: 68). Nonetheless, many in this cohort have returned, as indicated by the fact that by 2016 27% of 25-34 year old Poles had worked abroad during the last ten years (Cybulska 2016: 1).

If they returned to poor locations, they were likely to continue to migrate. However, for Krzaklewska's interviewees, as for many of mine who returned to Polish cities, it seems that living in the UK or Ireland was remembered as a pleasurable one-off experience, sometimes followed in later years by short business trips and holidays. Particularly if they gained soft skills such as foreign language fluency, returnees could slot back into the recovering labour market at home; at the same time, the range of leisure opportunities was expanding in Polish cities, which were becoming increasingly 'fun' places to live. Apsite-Berina et al (2019: 70) found that their young Romanian and Latvian sample easily reintegrated. Moreover, societies in CEE – especially in large cities -- were changing too, and alternative lifestyles becoming more accepted, so that it was easier to rejoin the mainstream. For example, Krzaklewska (2019: 46) mentions that cohabitation was rapidly increasing among this age group in Poland itself.

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<sup>3</sup> Eurostat, 'Unemployment rates by sex, age and citizenship', first quarter of 2004, <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>, accessed 10.05.20.

Return among this cohort also linked to life stage: as people neared 30 they often felt a need to settle down somewhere. A 29-year old Estonian interviewed by Saar and Saar (2020: 59) remarked: 'London is a nice change, but not a place for family. It is a phase of life.' Barcevičius (2016: 39), writing about Lithuanians, reports 'the feeling that a certain stage in life has come to an end and it is time to make a decision (according to one interviewee, "we either come back now or settle abroad for the rest of our lives").' However, migrants who returned to settle were assuming that the reintegration would be successful; when it actually compared unsatisfactorily with the foreign country, this could prompt them to re-think their plans, and perform a 'double return', deciding to settle abroad (White 2014). Settlement abroad also occurred thanks to family reunification. Although families could have open-ended plans initially, they had a tendency to settle, especially those with school-age children who could be expected to experience considerable reintegration problems (White 2017).

Despite these two quite specific forms of migration (middle-aged circular and youthful open-ended), since EU accession in 2004 and 2007 CEE migration has increasingly diversified. Ireland and the UK began to attract a range of age groups and more ordinary labour migrants, while countries where middle-aged circular migration predominated acquired more young people and professionals (Kowalska and Pelliccia 2012: 81; Strockmeijer et al 2019: 2444). Returns, when they occurred, were therefore also by a greater range of people. By 2020, a great deal of mobility consisted of educational migration and business trips by residents of flourishing cities, which had little in common with the more 'classic' labour migration of the 1990s and early 21st century: reintegration in such cases was often relatively straightforward.

One characteristic of CEE migration has been co-ethnic return. Cold War exiles and their descendants returned east after 1989 (see for example Tomić 2016 on the Croat and Czech experience). These returnees, despite their sometimes elite status, often experienced mixed success in integrating and enacting their business and other projects. Westward co-ethnic return, particularly of Hungarians and Germans from Romania and Poles and Czechs from former USSR, is often not easily distinguishable from regular labour or educational migration. Pragmatism rather than a strong sense of 'ethnic affinity' (Brubaker 1998) often seems to guide behaviour. For example, Jirka (2019) argues that Czechs from Ukraine are mostly hoping to acquire residency in Czechia. Despite formal entitlements, which simplify integration in certain institutional domains (e.g. education), co-ethnics arriving from poorer countries can find themselves not accepted as equals in their diasporic homelands. For instance, a Transylvanian Hungarian reported by Fox (2003: 457) complained 'Here [in Romania] we're Hungarians; there we're Romanians'. Similarly, a medical student from Ukraine quoted in Gońda (2016: 137) lamented that many Poles 'do not accept that it may happen that a Pole can be born outside Poland'.

Little return to CEE can be classed as 'forced', although EU citizens who cannot support themselves financially can be deported (Maslowski 2015) and deportations are more frequent in the UK since the 2016 Brexit referendum (Guma and Jones 2018: 6). Germany and Belgium too have tightened welfare restrictions for unemployed EU migrants, forcing them to leave (Barbulescu and Favell 2020). CEE Roma, and people 'perceived as Roma' (Juverdeanu 2019) have been especially vulnerable, with expulsions from France since

2010 arousing particular scholarly interest. However, these publications mostly focus on receiving countries and the EU and/or public discourse in Romania, rather than the return experiences of deportees. An exception is Juverdeanu (2019), whose ‘perceived as Roma’ interviewees actually self-identified as Romanians, and who exercised their free movement rights to return to France after being expelled.

External shocks, notably the Global Economic Crisis of 2008 and Brexit, were expected to produce waves of involuntary return. However, with some exceptions (notably Greece to Albania -- see Kerpaci and Kuka (2019: 105)) most authors seem to agree that the GEC did not create return waves (Benton and Petrovic 2013; Zaiceva and Zimmermann 2016). Research on Hungarian, Latvian, Polish and Romanian returnees during the GEC found that most ‘went back for family reasons or because they had achieved their emigration goals’ (Barcevičius et al. 2012: 1). Perhaps indeed return migration waves are not likely to happen within the EU, where EU migrants can sit out crises on welfare benefits, or move to more prosperous EU destinations. Similarly, the ‘Brexodus’ expected by some observers has not occurred on any scale, although (with the exception of Bulgarians and Romanians) new arrivals to the UK from CEE have fallen (Sredanovic 2020: 5).

Return to non-EU states might more often seem to be ‘involuntary’, as in the case of migrants from former USSR working in Czechia and Poland on temporary work permits. Although precise statistics are impossible to determine, this is clearly a large population, with, since 2015, at least a million Ukrainians located in Poland at any one time (Chmielewska et al 2016) and over 130,000 in Czechia.<sup>4</sup> However, the demand for migrant labour makes it easy to renew a work permit, so Ukrainians are not forced to return in a final sense after their permits expire. This is mostly circular migration including multiple returns. Nonetheless, there are also tendencies towards settlement, partly reflecting the workings of networks and family reunification, and the increasing diversification of the Ukrainian population abroad (Andrejuk 2017: 250, 259; Leontiyeva 2016: 145).

Voluntary post-conflict return has occurred to Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH) and Kosovo, after the wars of 1992-5 and 1999. Voluntary return takes place within official programmes or individually; according to Eastmond (2006: 147), migrants often preferred the latter, so they could make optimal use of social networks. Eastmond also argues that return is often most ‘sustainable’ when strong links are maintained with the former country of asylum. ‘Continued mobility after an initial return – including circulation and the development of a “transnational” lifestyle – may be more “sustainable” than a single and definitive return to the refugee’s place of origin (Black and Gent 2006: 15). Returnees can prefer return to ethnic enclaves, where it is easier to reintegrate (Joireman 2017, on Kosovo).

Porobić (2016) argues that because of continuing political conflict in BiH, strong grassroots civil society organisations, often with transnational connections, play a key role in helping secure sustainable return. However, this type of collective concern for the

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<sup>4</sup> CZSO (Český Statistický Úřad), ‘Foreigners, total by citizenship as at 31 December 2018’, p. 4 [https://www.czso.cz/documents/11292/27914491/1812\\_c01t01.pdf/b03cac12-7eef-419d-a66a-567c97b397ec?version=1.0](https://www.czso.cz/documents/11292/27914491/1812_c01t01.pdf/b03cac12-7eef-419d-a66a-567c97b397ec?version=1.0), accessed 10.05.20.

sustainability of local communities seems rare in CEE. Mobility of CEE citizens today is ordinarily an individual or family project, fanning out in all directions. Each person inhabits their own transnational social space, unlike the dense collective ties and responsibilities described in Levitt's classic (2001) study of links between Boca Canasta, Dominican Republic, and Boston, USA. There appear to exist only a handful of hometown associations: of Moldovans (Cingolani and Vietti 2018) and Romanian Saxons (Oltean 2019:50). Local diaspora organisations in receiving countries rarely consist of people from the same location in CEE and seem mostly concerned with their own affairs (White et al 2018: 45-6), rather than forging developmental links with sending locations which could facilitate returnees' reintegration.

As seems common across different countries (King 2000: 15), CEE surveys suggest that personal reasons predominate for return, even among economic migrants. This in turn contributes to the highly individualised character of return. Nonchev and Kristova (2018: 13-14), for instance, found the top motivation in their survey was 'affection for the family and my relatives in Bulgaria'. Similarly, Bakalova and Misheva (2018: 82) assert that 'non-economic factors have been the leading ones that have prompted the Bulgarian citizens to return to their homeland over the last decade.' Barcevičius (2016: 38) and White et al (2018: 21) each cite several references to similar Lithuanian and Polish findings. Even target migrants who return because they fulfilled their economic objectives can be said to return for personal reasons, since they tend to come back to the location where they feel at home.

## Structural factors conditioning reintegration experiences

Anghel et al (2019: 10) argue that return migration generally should be viewed as an 'unsettled process'. Although the concept of 'unsustainability' is usually applied to post-conflict return, surveys in some non-post-conflict countries of CEE suggest that there too a large share (in some cases over half) of returnees are prepared to migrate again. (See for example Nonchev and Hristova (2018: 10) on Bulgaria, or White (2014) on Poland.) If sending locations are unable to retain the return migrants this is partly linked to the many opportunities enjoyed by returning EU citizens, with their flourishing transnational networks, and ability to keep their options open. However, it also connects to structural impediments to reintegration in the locations of origin.

It seems that unemployment levels are often somewhat higher among returnees than among the local population (see e.g. Lapshyna and Duvell (2015: 295) on Ukraine; Grabowska (2016) on Poland; Zareva (2018: 112-3) on Bulgaria). Despite EU convergence policy, and considerable investment in infrastructure in recent years, the postcommunist region still suffers from regional inequalities.<sup>5</sup> According to various Polish surveys (White 2014: 37) return is usually to one's home location; this is likely to be typical for other countries, given the prevalence of return for personal reasons mentioned above. The fact that migrants return for emotional reasons to depressed locations, where they cannot

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<sup>5</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:GDP\\_per\\_inhabitant,\\_2017\\_\(EU-28\\_%3D\\_100,\\_index\\_based\\_on\\_GDP\\_in\\_purchasing\\_power\\_standards\\_\(PPS\)\\_in\\_relation\\_to\\_the\\_EU-28\\_average,\\_by\\_NUTS\\_2\\_regions\)\\_F1\\_RYB19.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:GDP_per_inhabitant,_2017_(EU-28_%3D_100,_index_based_on_GDP_in_purchasing_power_standards_(PPS)_in_relation_to_the_EU-28_average,_by_NUTS_2_regions)_F1_RYB19.png), accessed 11.5.20.

reintegrate into the labour market, makes them readier to consider migrating internationally again. When reintegration fails in the origin location, onward migration to a more prosperous location in the sending country might seem an obvious alternative to international migration. However, prejudices against internal migration seem to exist across the region (Bélorgey et al. 2012: 3).<sup>6</sup> In numerous interviews I have been told by Poles and Ukrainians that they preferred to move to friends and family abroad, rather than to a prospering city in their own country where they had no contacts.

Of course there is not a simple divide between wealthy locations where returnees reintegrate into the labour market, and peripheral ones where they migrate again. Social class and education are also factors affecting labour market reintegration. This was illustrated in my study of Płock, a medium-sized city of 120,404 (GUS 2019: 36), which combines features of the big city with those of a small town. Some returnees had found rewarding, high-powered jobs in the city administration and big companies where they could use their English and people skills gained abroad. As Aneta put it, 'If it hadn't been for Ireland I would be in a different job'. On the other hand, workers without university degrees struggled to find jobs which paid adequately and/or had incurred debts as the result of failed business endeavours which they could not pay off on a local wage. Echoing many of my small-town interviewees from earlier projects, Wojciech, a builder, explained why he preferred circular migration, despite having a family in Płock: 'You go abroad and work hard and long, but your work is rewarded. In Poland you work long and hard but with no effect at all.'

Although informal relations are a global phenomenon, they can be particularly prominent in post-communist societies. Unemployed returnees in my study in the small town of Limanowa in 2013 almost all complained that local jobs were reserved for friends and family. Even in Płock, Jagoda, a poorer interviewee, complained 'As it's a small town, getting a job depends on who you know, it's hard for the average person.' Ivanova (2015: 103, 109) similarly comments on how highly-skilled returnees to Bulgaria and BiH were disadvantaged by the attrition of their social networks while abroad and, in BiH, by corruption.

Structural factors which might imbue the reintegration process with homogeneity nationwide could include support offered by governments to facilitate reintegration. Various countries in CEE have attempted to provide such support: see for example Kaska (2013: 34-7) on Estonia or Ivanova (2015) on Bulgaria and BiH. Government programmes have not always been effectively designed and resourced, but problems also seem to stem from widespread scepticism about official initiatives – a common postcommunist phenomenon. This has been documented for example in Bulgaria by Bakalova and Misheva (2018: 97) and in Poland, Latvia and Romania by Barcevičius et al. (2012: 44-5). Kerpaci and Kuka (2019: 114) report that in Albania 'almost all of them [the interviewees] laughed in disbelief when we informed them about the government's intention to provide assistance.' Overall, Barcevičius (2016: 42) writing about Lithuania, concludes that return migrants succeed in reintegrating thanks to their own agency, not institutions.

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<sup>6</sup> Exceptions include Albania, where returnees prefer to settle in the capital, Tirana (Kerpaci and Kuka 2019: 105, 109) and BiH, where returning refugees often avoid settling in their places of origin (Porobić 2016: 8).



CEE societies are also marked by mistrust of strangers, although this varies between countries and has tended to decrease somewhat in recent years.<sup>7</sup> One aspect of mistrust is a certain hostility towards returnees on the part of non-migrants – a structural factor with consequences for reintegration experiences. Nevinskaitė (2016), writing about Lithuania, refers to low ‘country receptivity’ for returning migrants. Similar attitudes have been reported in Latvia (Barcevičius et al. 2012: 44); Estonia (Anniste et al. 2017: 106); and Poland (Dzięglewski 2016). However, there are also cases where trust in returnees improves over time. Coşciug shows how, despite the anti-migration stance of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the religious activism of returnees can transform local opinion: ‘within the religious communities I studied, migration is increasingly seen and portrayed as an “acceptable” strategy’ (Coşciug 2019: 94).

Widespread social conservatism in CEE – together with a legacy of underfunded institutional care – is manifested in the prevailing norm that care for older relatives should be provided within the family. Both survey and in-depth interview evidence show that family illness and caring responsibilities are common reasons for return to CEE, even to locations where it is hard to find a satisfactory livelihood. However, as Radziwinowiczówna et al (2018) demonstrate in their monograph on the ‘ethnomorality of care’ in two Polish small towns, it is hard to generalise about the experiences of returnees in providing care. This is partly because attitudes towards on-the-spot family/institutional and at-a-distance (transnational) care are pragmatic, and norms are in fact somewhat evolving: ‘cultures of care of countries of origin and destination intertwine’ (Radziwinowiczówna et al 2018: 89). Krzyżowski (2013) shows that Poles in Iceland and Austria – countries with very different ethnomoralities of care – also have different attitudes towards their caring responsibilities vis-à-vis parents in Poland.

## Social change and social remittances

Social change in this part of Europe is very rapid; hence, despite their often intense transnational ties while they are abroad, returnees can find it hard to readjust. Dzięglewski’s (2019) book about Polish return is titled *Coming Home to an (Un)familiar Country*. Vathi et al comment for example (2016: 164) on how returning parents did not understand the changed Albanian school system. Kerpaci and Kuka (2019: 109) also remark that ‘when they returned to Albania they had to adapt to the new way of living in Albania, because during their absence significant changes had occurred in Albanian society.’

Other potential returnees are impressed by development in their origin locations and this encourages them to return. Saar and Saar (2020) show how their Estonian interviewees chose Tallinn for its quality of life in preference to London. Barčevičius (2016: 41) writes that Lithuanian return migrants ‘also gave some reflection with regard to the quality of public services and quality of life in the capital Vilnius: these were considered acceptable and, in some respects, even better than in foreign countries: for example, more accessible and (or) cheaper but still high quality healthcare, childcare, relatively quick commuting between home and work.’ Similarly, some returnees I interviewed in Warsaw and Łódź felt that their

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<sup>7</sup> See for example World Values Survey data at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

home cities were civilisationally 'ahead' of smaller locations where they had worked in the UK and Ireland.

However, reintegrating migrants can also be put off by the reverse phenomenon: a belief that change in the origin society is too slow, and a perception of its shortcomings compared with the destination society. This is partly a personal, subjective matter. There is also empirical evidence that various legacies of the communist (1945-89) and transformation (1990s) period continue to shape social relations and local economies in the region, particularly in some locations and among some local groups. It is of course important not to overstate the significance of such legacies, failing to see similarities with other parts of Europe, stigmatising CEE for being 'behind', and not taking into account the extent to which legacies have been overcome and are no longer relevant (Müller, 2019).

Within the CEE region, EU countries – especially those which acceded in 2004 – have received more investment, are more prosperous and in various respects better functioning than their neighbours. This was reflected in comparisons with Poland made by my Ukrainian interviewees. On visits home, they noticed features of Ukrainian life today which Poles would mostly associate with 1990s Poland. The Ukrainians complained about how their home towns and cities in Ukraine<sup>8</sup> were characterised by discourteous driving; poor roads and public transport; unpleasant shop assistants; conspicuous consumption of expensive cars and clothes; the enclosure of public space in cities; and (most of all) corruption. Lapshyna and Düvell (2015: 300) make similar observations: for example, quoting one interviewee: 'When they [return migrants] return home, they face the same nasty things here, the rude behaviour of salespeople in a shop, for example. Now this would seem absolutely outrageous to them.' Kubal (2015: 83) notes that some Ukrainian returnees begin to drive more courteously once they return, and pick up litter more carefully.

Other communist legacies which seem to bother returnees include hierarchical management styles. They prefer more egalitarian models which they witnessed abroad. For example, Vathi et al (2016: 164) report that Albanian returnees preferred the more egalitarian schools they had encountered in Greece. Cieślík (2011: 1380) cites 'relationships with coworkers and the boss [and] the workplace atmosphere' in the UK as reasons why Poles preferred not to return to Poland. Dariusz, whom I interviewed in 2011, explained why he had returned to the UK with the complaint 'I couldn't get used to the Polish mentality, how the managers treat people.' Even in 2019, some of my Polish interviewees were struck by this difference, commenting on the informality of worker-boss relations they had witnessed in the Netherlands and UK. Interestingly, Ukrainians made similar comments about Poland.

To use Grabowska et al's (2017) framework for analysing the stages of social remitting: migrants may 'acquire' social remittances abroad, in the sense of being impressed by what they see, and correspondingly discontented when they return. However, this does not necessarily translate into their taking action to 'diffuse' those social remittances to attempt to change their origin societies and economies. A considerable part of return migration scholarship investigates whether and under what circumstances migrants become 'agents of

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<sup>8</sup> They came from locations across Ukraine, though not Kiev.

change', using their new skills and ideas. As Levitt (2001: 57) observed, when launching the concept of social remittances, migrants vary in their desire and capacity to act as agents of change. Some are more able than others to exploit their foreign experiences. Cormoş (2017: 7-9), for example, cites the case of a returnee who became a livestock farmer in a poor part of Northern Romania and succeeded in his business thanks to his German links and ability to tap into EU funds.

Equally important, as mentioned above, is local 'receptivity' (Nevinskaitė 2016) to migrants and their ideas. Barcevičius (2016: 39), for example, writing like Nevinskaitė about Lithuania, demonstrates how oldfashioned and suspicious employers preferred locally gained skills: 'when offered a choice between a job applicant with foreign experience and an equivalent applicant who gained the relevant skills in Lithuania, they would overwhelmingly opt for the local experience (78.2 per cent vs. 9.3 per cent).' Nonetheless – illustrating the actual complexity of the situation – he also reports that '57.9 per cent of the highly qualified returnees... agreed that migration had helped them to find a job (or start a business)'.

One aspect of social remitting which has particularly interested a number of scholars is gender roles and relations, which are generally more conservative in CEE than in the West, although also changing to some extent, especially among younger people and in cities. Researchers have uncovered a certain amount of evidence that return migrants do change local attitudes: for example, raising the respect accorded to women who migrate alone from poor, conservative rural areas of Poland to work as carers in Italy and become the main breadwinners for their households in Poland (Cieślińska 2014: 67; Urbańska 2015). Vlase (2013: 87) shows how some Romanian women who have worked abroad try to encourage their daughters to be more ambitious in their choice of career in Romania.

Another area which has been quite extensively researched – although mostly with reference to migrants still living abroad – is attitudes towards racial diversity and homosexuality. My own interviews with return migrants in Poland in 2016-19 bear out the findings of other scholars that some people become more intolerant as a result of migration, while others become more open-minded. In my sample, the latter included some less well-educated, small-town and older interviewees. In fact, since attitudes are already becoming more liberal among the middle class in Polish cities, for a multitude of other reasons, it is in smaller locations and working-class *milieux* that social change (in the sense of increasing numbers of more open-minded citizens) can be most impacted by migration experience (White et al 2018).

## Conclusion

How universal are return experiences? It seems obvious that specific features of origin communities must be significant. In the case of CEE, this chapter suggests that legacies of the communist period and transformation can inhibit reintegration. By 2020, these are less marked, but remain important in some places. Spatial inequalities persist, and returnees can find it hard to integrate into certain labour markets characterised by unemployment, cronyism and (in Ukraine) corruption. Migrants nonetheless return to unpromising local economies, since they often come back for emotional reasons, and since there is a certain

culture of not engaging in internal migration. Mistrust in institutions and strangers is another communist legacy, which can manifest itself in scepticism about government reintegration programmes, and employers' reluctance to hire returnees.

However, the 'objective realities' of the origin location are not the only factor conditioning reintegration, which has to be seen in its transnational context (i.e. taking into account the receiving societies, outside CEE). Dissatisfaction with reintegration is often linked to continuing wage gaps between CEE and western Europe, and to other comparisons returnees make in their everyday lives between the origin location and their foreign home. These often seem to involve, for example, a preference for less hierarchical workplaces, or more civility from officials. Some returnees are bothered by gender inequality and homophobia in CEE. Although they acquire these social remittances when living abroad, they can feel frustrated by their inability to diffuse them to others upon their return home. Since they are often able to maintain intense and dynamic transnational ties after their return, these comparisons remain fresh in their minds and encourage thoughts of 'return' abroad. This helps account for the apparent temporariness of many returns to CEE.

Nonetheless, CEE is a varied and fast-changing part of the world. Socio-economic change in CEE over the past thirty years means that much migration from CEE, especially by educated people from the larger cities, involves relocation to western cities which are actually quite similar to their geographical and social locations of origin in CEE. This facilitates reintegration, at least as far as local structural factors are concerned. In this sense mobility from and to CEE is not that different from the mobility of West Europeans. Hence the specificity of CEE return migration has been somewhat diluted over recent decades, and it is probably more helpful to view it nowadays less as conditioned by the communist legacy, and more in the context of the highly diverse, dynamic, individualised and transnational mobilities characterising the EU as a whole.

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