The dream of migration of minority group members – A multiple case study

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2022

Abstract

Minority group members often live in a transnational reality, which can relate to a struggle in defining the own identity in a distinct way fitting the pre-set categories. Some individuals facing this struggle seek a change of environment with the hope to being able to redefine their identity in a different society – thus they migrate. This research investigated the pre-migration period of minority group members in two European countries, namely Estonia and Italy. The two groups were investigated in 2020 (the Russian speakers in Estonia) and 2021 (German speakers in South Tyrol/ Italy). The methodology was a multiple case study using grounded theory and a mixed methods design, performed through an identical questionnaire for both cases and additional document reviews. The results of the study clearly show a higher tendency of minority group members to migrate, connected to migration imaginaries and a negative connotation to the minority status in the current country of residence. Furthermore, the data indicates a multi-faced identity in minority group members and a struggle to feel belonging, which is imagined to being more distinct when changing into a new society. This research contributes to the literature on migration of minorities, changing the focus from ethnic migration towards the consideration of minority group member as possible migrants with a variety of destinations not connected to the own ethnicity. This study offers new insides on the pre-migration period of minority group members and the emotional and social motives for a possible migration.

Introduction

This is a working paper, and hence it represents research in progress and preliminary results. The paper was designed as deliverable according to the EU regulations within the European Joint Doctorate MOVES and is thus, openly accessible in its work in progress stage. This article is a draft of the final paper and will be progressively updated, thus the findings and interpretations in this version are tentative.

Most countries host at least one minority group, whether a linguistic, ethnic or cultural minority. Uncountable people grow up in a reality consisting of a mixture of cultures, an in-between, a half and half. How do they find an identity in this space, concerning nationhood, belonging and heritage? How does this membership of a minority group influence the individual's life path and decisions? This are some of the questions addressed in this study.

Migration is a widely studied topic and a major global trend and today explored in its different manifestations. Nevertheless, there do remain gaps in the literature on migration. Discussing migration and minorities, the published literature tends to focus on minority and diasporic groups as a consequence of historical migration. Very little research has been done to grasp the migration behaviours of minority group members, and if so the main focus was laid on co-ethnic return migration (see e.g. Tsuda, 2010; Zhen Li, 2021). There remains a gap in research exploring other potential migration aspirations of minority group members, as minority group members. This is the gap to which this research contributes, and, in so doing, providing a wider view on minority migration in Europe and the factors influencing it. Furthermore, there is a gap in research into the pre-migration period (Amit and Riss, 2013; Raghuram 2013). Studies dealing with this sequence of migration are mostly based on data gathered following the act of migration, and hence the collected data is grounded on the subsequent perception of the specific time (e.g. in Amit and Riss, 2014; Bürgelt et.al, 2008, Chen 2017; Song, 2015).). This thesis, on the other hand, is about the dreams and imaginations connected to a potential migration project, about the expectations of minority youth about their future mobility and identity. Filling this gap with data of the pre-migration period is a total novum of this research and provided through an exceptional process of data collection. The sample consists of high-school graduates, as first they most likely have not experienced migration before, and second, they may be in the pre-migration period if they decide to move abroad for study reasons. The participants are taken from both minority and majority groups and thus the differences and similarities in their migration plans and aspirations can be explored. This can contribute to the literature of migration aspirations of minorities and minority identities. Therefore, a multiple case study was made, exploring the pre-migration period of minority group members in Italy and Estonia.

Background

Estonia is located in north-eastern Europe and, with a population of 1.3 million inhabitants (Statistiks Estonia, 2022), is a relatively small European country. In Estonia, the Slavic community is mainly concentrated in the capital, Tallinn and in the north-eastern parts of the country, especially in the region of Ida-Virumaa, close to the Russian border. Notably in the north-eastern part, ethnic Estonians are often the minority group and Russophones the majority group (Aasland and Fløtten, 2001) and the total number of Russophones in Estonia is 25 % (Willis 2019).

Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol is the northernmost region of Italy and shares a border with Austria. The region is inhabited by three different language groups. According, the latest census of 2011 the population of the province of Bolzano (this paper will also use the synonym South Tyrol) is 26% Italian speaking, 69% German speaking and 5% Ladin speaking (ASTAT 2020).

Migration imaginations in the pre-migration period

Most research on migration is limited on the post migration period, rather than collecting data in the pre-migration period while the imaginations and dreams are still not influenced by the actual experience. Thus, the imagination of the migration in most studies is reconstructed and therefore it might be influenced by the occured events (Salazar 2020). Nevertheless, even though the motivations for mobility are multifaced, the ability to imagine other places and lives is the starting point for any move (Salazar 2011). 'Cultural imaginaries' are shared social imaginaries, based on a set of collective knowledge, notions, and images (Cooke, 2015), the theory is a combination of Benedict Andersons (1982) *imagined communities*, as well as Appadurai's (2002) geographical imaginaries and Hall's (1997) cultural representation theories.

Acccording to Dantzer (2017) migration is a possible way to imagine a happier future, thus the individual aims for happiness through migration. She proposes a way of looking at migration as a 'mindwork', done prior of migration as well as ongoing throughout the process, as an emotional and mental process. The journey of migration can be seen as a happiness enterprise invested with hope. In the existing literature there is a tendency to see a migrant as *homo economicus* and to define emotions as irrational and thus irrelevant. Emotions are seen as inconsequential and as not crucial for the migration decision. Yet, this tendency oversimplifies the analysis of migration and leaves out important factors to understand the behaviour of prospective migrants (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015).

The difference between actual emotions, experienced in the moment and imagined or remembered emotions need to be acknowledged (Svašek, 2008). A small branch of studies is exploring the imagination of mobility as a process, which starts prior the actual move and is not exclusive to people who migrate but can be found in mobile as well as in immobile people (Koikkalainen and Kyle, 2016). This process was named *cognitive migration* by Koikkalainen and Kyle (2016) and includes imagining the self, living in a destination, socially but also emotionally. According to this theory the minds of people start migrating while the physical body is still in the same place, a sort of mental time travel is preparing the individual for the possible future.

The role of emotions in decision making is important in two ways: The immediate emotions, which are the ones experienced during the process of decision making, and the expected emotions which are the prediction of the emotional consequences of the decision (Loewenstein and Lerner 2009). Thus, investigating the pre-migration period means exploring the situation in exactly this stage, the expected future emotions influence the persons decision, yet also the current emotions do so.

There is a gap in the literature concerning minorities as migrants, not looking at it from an ethnic return migration perspective but rather focussing on the factors that make a minority group member migrate, may it be to a country similar to his ethnic origin or a third country. Furthermore, the exploration of the pre-migration period is still rare in the literature, and there is a lack in the knowledge about the emotional factors during the decision-making progress of prospective migrants.

Methods

This study employs a mixed research strategy, precisely a within-stage mixed-model design in a concurrent time order which combines quantitative and qualitative methods in one paper (Creswell, 2012) and a multiple case study approach using grounded theory. The Estonian case study was conducted in 2020, while the case study in Italy took place in 2021.

A case is a specific entity, which is even in a multiple case study, in the first step examined on its own, with the very aim of understanding the case (Stake 2013). This is a multiple-case study, which as a design reached more popularity in the recent years (Yin 2009). The multiple case study allows the researcher to analyse every case in the respective setting (Baxter and Jack 2008) and combine the findings. When choosing multiple case studies, the cases need to be similar in some ways, and thus examples of the same phenomenon. The essence of a multicase study is to understand the differences and the similarities of the cases, after having analysed them separately (Stake 2013).

Grounded theory is the concept of a research to collect and analyse data to than construct the theory from the data itself. It starts with inductive data, going back and forth between the data and the theory and interacting with the collected data throughout the process (Charmaz, 2014), thus, data collection, the theory and the analysis stand in reciprocal relationship to each other. The starting point is thus not a theory, but an area of study and everything relevant to it is allowed to emerge (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). The multiple case study in the grounded theory is a spiral process repeating itself. The hypothesis is strategically worked out in relation to the data in the course of analysis (Glaser and Strauss 2010).

Data collection

The settings for the **Estonian study** consist of eight Upper Secondary Schools in Estonia. The participants of the study were students from the graduating classes. The survey was distributed online among approximately 300 students in the 12th grade of eight Upper Secondary schools. A total of 155 answers were collected from which 151 could be used for analysis.

For the **Italian study**, nearly the same questionnaire was distributed. A total of 67 German questionnaires were answered and 24 Italian questionnaires.

	Estonia			Italy			
Total number of participants	151			90			
Age	89 participants 18 years old (59%)	59 participants 19 years old (39%)	3 participants 20 years old (2%)	36 participants 18 years old (40%)	44 participants 19 years old (49%)	9 participants 20 years old (10%)	1 participant 21 years old (1%)
Gender	82 female (54%)		69 male (46%)	74 female (82 %)	14 male (16%)		2 non-binary (2%)
Citizenship	144 Estonian (95%)	1 Russian (>1%)	5 Estonian and Russian (3%) / 1 Other (>1%)	No data (From the place of birth and the nationality of the parents it can be assumed that around 96% hold an Italian nationality (eventually another additional one) and 4% the citizenship from another country.			
Native language	73 Russian speakers (minority) (48%)		78 Estonian speakers (majority) (52%)	67 German speakers (minority)		24 Italian speakers (majority)	
Household income	43 above average (28%)	95 average (62%)	7 below average (5%) / 6 don't know/not applicable (5%)	14 above average (16%)	67 average (74%)	7 below average (8%)	2 don't know/not applicable (2%)
Parents language	Both Russian 76 (50%)	Mixed languages 8 (6%)	Both Estonian 67 (44%)	Both German 48 (53%)	Both Italian 11 (12%) / Both Ladin 4 (5%)	Both another but the same 7 (8%)	Mixed language 20 (22%)

Only for the Italian case additional secondary data was used, as the target number of participants was not reached. Four sources were chosen to be used:

- ASTAT, A.P.B.-S.L. für S., 2018. Südtirol in Zahlen - 2018.
- ISTAT, 2014. The use of Italian language, dialects and other languages in Italy.
- Oberrauch, K., Perkmann, U., Romagna, F., 2019. Brain Drain – Brain Gain: Wie attraktiv ist Südtirols Arbeitsmarkt? WIFO Studie 2.19.
- Südstern – Das Netzwerk für Südtiroler im Ausland, 2014. Ansichten, Einstellungen und Perspektiven der Südsterne - Eine Studie über Südtiroler im Ausland mit Impulsen für die Zukunft Südtirols.

The first step was to find appropriate data reports, which were critically assessed in their validity and credibility (O`Leary 2014). Thereafter, a selection of the most essential parts was made to define the context of the investigation and to converge towards answering the research questions. Finally, the findings of the existing studies were synthesised and interpreted across the studies in order to provide a broader picture (Bowen 2009; O`Leary 2014).

Results and Discussion

Looking at the first theme, migration plans, a strong similarity was found between both case studies: there is a clear tendency of minority adolescents to choose international mobility over immobility, while majority adolescence migrate rather internally or not at all. This is a clear outcome in both groups, and can be confirmed by existing reports concerning the Italian case (see e.g. Oberrauch et. al., 2019), yet no previous studies concerning emigration of Russian Estonians could be found. Yet, one strong differentiation between the groups needs to be considered: the choice of destination differs strongly. While Russian Estonian chose different European countries (the UK is the most common destination country), German Italians choose mainly German speaking countries (Austria, German and Switzerland). This could be interpreted as an ethnic migration, yet the typical patterns identifying an ethnic migration could not being found among the participants neither in the secondary data. No participant mentioned a nostalgia for the 'homeland', which is typical for ethnic migration (Reynolds, 2008), neither the word 'kin state' was ever used. There is no indicator that the longing of the parents for a former 'home country' was transferred to the next generation, as it would be exemplary for ethnic migration (Wessendorf, 2017). Furthermore, no participant could feel any connection to 'returning' when migrating to a German speaking country[1], thus the 'myth of return' (Singh, 2001) cannot be found among the participants or secondary data. Therefore, the migration plans of German Italians cannot be categorized as ethnic migration. For the Russian

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[1] This could also not be found for prospective migrants to Austria, even though the grandparents of most inhabitants of South Tyrol have been Austrians before the border was moved.

Estonians, the tendency to move 'to the West' is much stronger than the migration to Russia or other Russian speaking countries. In order to uncover the factors influencing this decision, the migration aspirations found in both case studies need to being compared.

Looking into the aspirations of the participants in both case studies some similarities can be discovered. It needs to be acknowledged that economic factors, like perceived better labour market or educational system play a role in the decision. Yet, this study is more interested in the underlying aspirations. In both case studies, minority group members feel a strong need to leave the current place of residency, they feel 'pushed' away. This is not the case for the Estonian majority group. Yet, it is so too, for the Italian majority group in the study. In the Estonian case study, Russian speaker feel discriminated, they feel deprived of their rights. In line with previous studies, Russian Estonians still face a higher degree of discrimination in the country (see e.g. Aasland and Fløtten, 2001; Lindemann, 2009; Trifonova, 2021), which is a driver for migration. Italian native speakers feel 'pushed' away from the region just as much as the German minority group. German and Italian speaker in South Tyrol feel excluded and discriminated yet concerning different factors. Italian speakers feel excluded from the society and not fully accepted; they feel that they will "never be fully integrated". On the other hand, German speaker feel excluded on a state level, thus, not in their daily life but rather in the possibilities they have within the country. It can be stated, that seen from a nation state level, German speakers are a minority group, Italian speakers in South Tyrol are a *regional minority group*, sharing many emotions with other minority group members.

From the data collected, it can be drawn, that different negative emotions are connected to the current place of residency of all the participants, except Estonian native speakers. As seen in the data, minority group members as well as Italian majority group members, do not have such a strong feeling of belonging to the place of residency. This in connection with the status as a (regional or national) minority group membership might lead to defining a coping strategy to counterwork the negative emotions. Therefore, it can be said that the emotional backdrop for minority group members in the pre-migration period is clearly a feeling of not belonging to the current place and the imagination of being happier after the migration.
According to Findlay et al. (2005) student migration is driven by intentions rooted in the past but also imagined future benefits. The minority group members try to change their situation through a move and hope for a change.

Bolognani (2016) is arguing towards the resilience of the `return fantasies`, thus changing the attention from the outcome of mobility to the thoughts and the effect of them on the current life. This can be adapted to the current case as well, even though the adolescents to not have `return

fantasies`, but rather 'arrival fantasies', to a place where they fully belong, which offers an emotional way of mastering their daily challenges as minority, which among others is the lack of feeling of belonging in the majority society.

Imagined happiness in another place as driver for a migration decision was found in the quantitative and in the qualitative data. This expectation to being happier somewhere else can be seen as a 'cultural imaginary' (Viteri, 2015), thus imagining places and the wellbeing there which is a motivational factor for migration. In line with Czubinska (2017), the imagination has become a more observed topic in recent discourse about migration. Bolognani (2016) lays the focus on the wish and the fantasy itself, rather than on the actual move, as a part of the process of identity building, eventually helping to overcome traumas or as answer to the given socio-political context of the individual. Yet, this topic is still not sufficiently researched, as most scholars focus their research on the outcome of migration, the integration, the return etc. while neglecting the role of fantasies of migration and the physic life of migrants (Bolognani, 2016).

Conclusion

This paper explored the migration dreams, aspirations, and imaginations of minority group members in Estonia and Italy. Both case studies were analysed separately, before the results were combined in the discussion part. It has shown that minority group members plan international migration much more than their majority peers and the data indicates that indeed many of them conduct the move. This can be said for both cases, Russian speakers in Estonia and German speakers in Italy. To a certain amount, economic factors play a role in this decision, better job opportunities and better education abroad, thus an upwards mobility. This might be connected to the fact that both Estonia and Italy are among the countries with less opportunities and lower income within a European context. One of the core differences in the migration plans in the two case studies are the destination countries. Prospective migrants from Estonia favour European countries (the UK holds the top rank), while prospective international migrants from the German minority in Italy mainly move to Austria, Germany and Switzerland, thus neighbouring German speaking countries.

Furthermore, all participants who plan to migrate imagine themselves being happier in their destination. They have the expectation to find a strong community there and to improve the state of happiness in general. They imagine a community abroad prior the move, and project the currently missing factors for happiness onto their future destination. Many participants are sure to find people which are more alike them, as in the current place and to find a place they fully belong. Those

expectations mirror the lack in the current situation, which again is connected to the segregation of the language groups and the perceived or real exclusion of many of the participants.

Thus, in more general terms it can be said that minority group members have a higher tendency to migrate, may it be to a 'kin state' or to another country, which offers the prospective migrants the option to dream about a better future. For all minority group members, this is connected to the separation of the population and the exclusion leading to the difficulty to integrate in the society.

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