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East–West Mobility Space – The Role of Different Types of Capitals in Moving or Staying Put

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This article examines the mobility patterns in East–West movement within Europe and challenges the prevailing perception that migration is an act of agency while staying put is seen as having a lack of agency. It argues that staying put can also involve extensive strategies and should be recognised as an active choice. The article utilises Bourdieu's three types of capital (economic, social and cultural) to understand the strategies employed in both staying put and successful migration. It suggests that individuals can compensate for the absence of one type of capital by leveraging another type; however, it also suggests that, in order to understand mobility space between CEE and Nordic countries, the presence of formalised welfare provision in Nordic countries is an important aspect. The focus of the article is on single mothers, who are considered to be one of the most vulnerable groups in Central and Eastern European societies. Based on 25 interviews with Estonian single mothers, the article suggests that migration often occurs due to a lack of alternative options.

Keywords: *immobility, staying put, CEE, types of capital*

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Introduction

Several articles in recent years have pointed out that migration literature focuses on movers (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). Moving as a decision is problematised and considered to be a highly complex phenomenon whereas staying put is naturalised. This portrayal is fair because movers make up just 3 per cent of the global population (UN 2015). Nevertheless, there has been an increased focus on problematising staying by noting, among other things, the temporary aspect of such decisions (Coulter, van Ham and Feijten 2011). Most of the research on staying, however, focuses on rural communities and not on those who have decided not to move internationally (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018; Ye 2018). Rural communities are the stereotypical scene for massive outmigration – something which is difficult to imagine at country level. This article, however, focuses on a country – Estonia – which has experienced a significant emigration of the more precarious groups in society. It specifically examines the strategies used by Estonian single mothers who either choose to migrate to Nordic countries or to remain in Estonia. The article aims to explore the interconnectedness between moving and staying put as a migration phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe, using Bourdieu's notion of capitals (Bourdieu 1977) (economic, social and cultural) as an analytical framework. The Estonian countryside, together with the poorer urban populations, resembles the familiar scene of rural communities in many Western countries (Alanen 2017). This is a population that feels abandoned by politicians. Rural communities in Estonia have experienced a slow but persistent decay since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Nugin 2014). Unlike the rural-to-urban migration of Western European countries, many of Estonia's rural population decide not to move to Estonian cities but to go, instead, to neighbouring Finland. The migration corridor between Estonia and Finland has a high volume of traffic (Jakobson, Järvinen-Alenius, Pitkänen, Ruutsoo, Keski-Hirvelä and Kalev 2012). The typical family model in many Estonian rural communities is that of a husband working in Finland while his wife and children remain in Estonia (Telve 2018). This model of livelihood allows for one member of the family partnership to 'stay put' while the other migrates. However, what happens for families who do not have another partner to act as the migratory breadwinner?

This article focuses on Estonian single mothers, both those who have decided to move to one of the Nordic countries (Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden or Finland) and those who have decided to stay put. Single mothers, due to major issues with obtaining alimony in Estonian society, are one of the most precarious groups in the state. They thus have a considerable incentive to move to neighbouring richer Nordic countries; however, this study has shown that, instead, many choose to remain in Estonia. The reasons for staying occasionally resemble those claimed by the working class in decaying urban communities – including, *inter alia*, the need for a social safety net as a way of compensating for the insecurity of work and a private life (Preece 2018). The article draws on 25 interviews with migrant and non-migrant Estonian single mothers. The interviews were analysed using the grounded theory method, including an open coding process to freely uncover any emerging topics.

Immobility, mobility and class

Migration has traditionally attracted more attention by scholarly researchers than either non-migration or remaining; however, recently this trend is seeing a reversal. Although there are some quantitative studies that demonstrate the various factors which influence the probability of staying put, most of them still focus on immigrants, comparing their life satisfaction with that of stayers. For instance, Mulder and Malmberg (2014), in emphasising both the positive and the negative aspects of staying, contend that local ties such as work, the presence of family, social connections and lower educational attainment can be associated with less mobility. One of the main criticisms of mobility studies' research is the existence of a predominant mobility discourse

which recognises mobility and devalues staying (Hjälml 2014). This type of discourse is not only to be found at a scholarly level; Ní Laoire (2000) found that migrants often had condescending attitudes towards stayers. Staying therefore becomes a non-event, whereas moving is considered to be a dramatic life-changing decision. As Hjälml (2014) notes, this sort of bias has been constitutive in developing a paradigm where staying is an act of non-agency, while moving is an act of agency.

The view of staying as non-agentic has recently been challenged (Mata-Codesal 2015; Schewel 2019; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018; Stockdale, Theunissen and Haartsen 2018). Gray (2013) has a counter-argument, which suggests that staying also requires agency and might, in fact, be a conscious decision that an individual makes multiple times throughout his or her life. Schewel (2015) argues that, whereas the mobility turn has contributed greatly towards understanding movement, its presentation of immobility has been one-sided. She points out that each individual has a distinct relationship with either mobility or immobility: while, for some, it is an issue of free choice, others feel compelled to follow one option rather than another.

Indeed, there is pressure to see the versatility among stayers. Traditionally such variances have been described as comprising three classifications of immobility: involuntary, desired and acquiescent. While the former two classifications are self-explanatory, Schewel (2015) clarifies 'acquiescent' as describing people who have neither any aspiration or desire to migrate nor to stay. Furthermore, Ye (2018) notes that people who decide to stay put in rural communities in China, for example, often have complex life strategies such as holding down multiple jobs or having one family member migrate in order to enable others to stay. Overall, however, research has paid little attention to the strategies which stayers use in order to be able to remain – an omission which this article intends to address.

Another aspect on staying and moving needs to be raised. Donkersloot (2011) argues that there is little analytical value in using a binary categorisation of movers versus stayers when analysing mobility and suggests, instead, terms like 'swings' or 'spells' to draw attention to the non-permanence of both moving and staying. This aspect of the temporariness of moving is strongly confirmed by this article, which has at least two categories of people who either move with the intention of returning or are ambivalent about their decision to move or stay.

An important aspect in terms of immobility studies which has so far received little attention is its interlinkage with a variety of social categories. Some scholars have raised the issue with gender. Ye (2018), for instance, describes how prevailing gender norms in China make it more difficult for women to migrate. Class as a category seems to remain in the background in immobility studies, not the least through reference to agency vs structure. The models that describe staying mention the necessity of having both the aspiration and the ability to migrate (see Schewel 2019), thus turning our attention to the means needed for moving. Interestingly, studies in both immobility and migration seem confined to the notion that migration needs more resources than staying. However, this article raises some serious costs which some individuals who stay may incur. Therefore, in terms of decision-making I suggest that we should refer to the same categories no matter whether the topic is immobility, mobility or, indeed, both and acknowledge there may be individuals who aspire to stay put but are incapable of doing so – thus becoming involuntary movers.

This raises the issue of class in mobility and immobility. Van Hear (2014) criticises previous studies for their degree of class blindness in the context of researching migration: he notes that the impact of class on migration in the context just of migration outcomes is well documented but that the same impact on the whole process has not been well researched. He makes a valid point in terms of the relevance of the various kinds of capitals needed for moving, by insisting that economic capital might not always have been the most important issue, as the lack of it could be buffered by cultural or social capital. Or, *vice versa*, stayers may also require various forms of capital (Van Hear 2014). This point enables us to look at the strategies of the stayers from a more informed perspective. The lens of capital for staying has been already applied by Forsberg (2019) who

employs the term ‘spatial capital’ for describing the relevance of place-specific skills, education etc. in the decision-making of young rural Swedes.

Van Hear (2014) also refers to the precariat – a group defined by Standing (2011). The precariat is a merger of the words **precarious** with **proletariat** and refers to anyone who suffers from a permanent state of precarity, which implies an existence with neither predictability nor security. The precariat is thus unable to live and pursue a livelihood in a coherent and sustainable way. Van Hear (2014) notes that both would-be and actual migrants could be part of the global precariat. Migration has often been a way out of a precarious situation; however, Preece (2018) contests this idea by noting that, for many English working-class precarious workers, not migrating can be a safer option. She argues that, for many of her interviewees, social contacts provided a way to survive the instability of their livelihoods and working contracts; these social contacts formed an asset which would have been lost upon moving. Overall it is clear that we need more research on the interlinkages between class and mobility and immobility processes, just as Van Hear (2014) suggests. This article will offer insights not only into using migration as a strategy but also into the various strategies which people employ for staying put. It also illustrates the class aspect in those choices.

This article draws on Bourdieu (1977), who uses the terms economic, cultural and social to define the concept of capital: economic capital consists of various economic resources, cultural capital comprises knowledge, tastes, skills, education and other competences, while social capital includes vital social links and the size of the social networks which can be mobilised (Bourdieu 2011[1986]). However, Bourdieu also includes symbolic capital, which is not used in this article – and also notes that capitals can be converted into one another. Van Hear (2014) argues that the idea of converting one capital into another is of particular use in migration studies because it helps to understand how someone lacking economic capital can still be able to migrate – through, for instance, using their social networks. However, as I will show in this article, the idea of conversion can also be useful for understanding people’s immobility. Preece (2018), although not relying on the notion, alludes to the concept of capital when she concludes that, for the English working class, the instability of precarious jobs is compensated for by social networks. This article also notes how cultural capital, in terms of knowledge, can be used as a strategy for survival instead of economic capital. In relation to social capital, there is also a flourishing field which focuses on the relevance of social networks for migration (for the Estonian case, see Puura, Silm and Ahas 2018). So not only can social capital intermediate staying put but it can also help people to migrate.

Exit, voice or loyalty for Baltic workers

The title of this section has been borrowed from an article by Markku Sippola (2013), which explores the impact of neoliberal regimes and labour reforms over the course of the 1990s and 2000s on the workers in three Baltic nations. Hirschman (1970) distinguishes the three choices available to workers in precarious full-time jobs: (i) leave the enterprise, (ii) protest against unfair working conditions and (iii) remain loyal to the enterprise. Sippola (2013) applies this distinction to workers in the neoliberal Baltic states by analysing their mobility and immobility. According to Fröhlig, Saar and Runfors (2018), probably around 10 per cent of Estonians have migrated abroad since 2000. Sippola (2013) contends that the neoliberal labour reforms were the outcome of the rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises during the 1990s and the strong austerity policy imposed during the financial crisis in 2008. Sippola (2013) argues that the labour reforms have resulted in the end of mandatory labour-union membership and in labour unions losing all relevance in the three countries as well as resulting in low taxation and low social benefits. Furthermore, Estonian labour law is very flexible from the point of view of the employer, granting him or her rights for the almost immediate dismissal of workers without warning and a minimal contribution after dismissal.

In terms of the permanency of migration, Veidemann (2010) found that, in 2010, about 38 per cent of Estonia's 1.4 million population considered migration, with 13 per cent thinking about a permanent move. Saar, Frohlig and Runfors (2017) record that about 25 per cent of Estonian migrants in Sweden can be considered to be permanent migrants. The results can be interpreted in multiple ways, one of which is that there is a large element of the population that is either reluctant to reveal their mobility decisions or has engaged in circular migration. The same applies to potential migrants. There is an active mobility space developing between Estonia and the Nordic countries, which includes all types of migration, *inter alia* commuting, circular migration and permanent migration (see also Saar, Frohlig and Runfors 2017). In terms of the reasons for migration, Sommers and Woolfson (2014) suggest the adoption of a new term for Baltic countries in particular – *austeriat* – which refers to the effect of strict **austerity** policies, combined with the resulting outmigration, on the *prolateriat*. Genelyte (2018), however, suggests that the roots of migration are somewhat more complicated and that, whereas the different policies during the economic crisis might have helped to lessen the high levels of migration, the effect of low salaries on migration should not be overlooked. Kõre (2011, however, also notes that apart, from the low level of wages, 40 per cent of working-age people in Estonia were afraid of dismissals and 49 per cent were dissatisfied with the promotional prospects at their work. Hence, the overall precarity seems to have taken a toll on Estonians and pushed them towards migration.

Despite this, Estonia is the only Central-Eastern European country where the educational level of outmigrants is lower than that of the population as a whole (Anniste, Tammaru, Pungas and Paas 2012). Furthermore, net migration has been positive for the last few years, with more people returning than leaving, suggesting that we look at loyalty. Sippola (2013) notes that, while the conditions for exit and protest are quite straightforward, the strategies for loyalty need further investigation and suggests that the Baltic states are not rewarding their citizens for loyalty by treating them as entrepreneurs. Somewhat contrary evidence is offered by Sojka and Saar (2020), who in a comparison of Poland and Estonia, conclude that Estonians' positive attitude towards outmigrants as well as the willingness to still consider them as Estonians even after they have migrated, might influence their potential return. Furthermore, the discursive influence which neoliberalism has had on people's way of thinking should not be underestimated. Fröhlig, Saar and Runfors (2019) demonstrate that Estonians in Sweden were reluctant to apply for social benefits because they considered it shameful to rely on the state's help.

Finally, a description of the particular group which this article examines – single mothers – is necessary. About 21–22 per cent of households in Estonia are managed by single mothers (Eurostat 2019). This is one of the highest single-mother household rates in Europe. Unlike other countries with high single-parent household rates, such as the Nordic countries, Estonia does not have a state organised collection of alimony. Hence, mothers need to apply for alimony directly from the child's father and the payment of funds is wholly dependent on the financial situation of her former spouse. However, because former spouses commonly use the informal economy to avoid paying alimony, many single mothers receive little or no alimony to support their children. There is also scarce social support, with the benefit for single parents being only €19 per month. In order to receive this benefit, parents need to go through extensive testing which includes proving that their former partner is unable to pay them any support. Consequently, very few of the group of Estonian single mothers whom I studied were receiving state-financed support. There is also a needs-based benefit, which is not particularly high in value and involves rigorous testing and the presentation of all household bills to the social authorities on a monthly basis. The single mothers I talked to all referred to the denigrating attitude of the authorities when applying for needs-based benefits.

Methodology

This article is based on 25 in-depth interviews with Estonian single mothers. The sample was diverse in terms of the respondents' socio-economic positions, as some struggled financially while others were able to maintain a comfortable lifestyle (a more precise table on the sample is in the Appendix). The sample contained both single mothers who had never migrated, those who had migrated to Nordic countries and returned and those who were currently residing in Nordic countries.

The interviewees were found through various methods – via the snowball strategy, through Facebook groups and through personal networks as well as blogs. The study was carried out between 2018 and 2019. The majority of the interviews were face-to-face, with some conducted using Skype. I met the interviewees either at their homes or in public spaces such as cafés. All the names of my participants are anonymised and consent forms were completed by them at the interview. I followed a quite open interview schedule and, using the grounded theory method, adjusted my questions as the study went along. The grounded theory method is an inductive way of researching which allows the researcher – who might have an initial hypothesis or expectation of the potential outcomes – to leave ample space for the interviewees, guiding them in the process (Charmaz 2011). In my case this resulted in developing an initial interest in how the interviewees managed the relationship with their former partner.

The grounded theory method was also the basis of the analysis of the interviews. The study recognised, from the outset, the characteristics of migration between Estonia and the Nordic countries. Research has revealed that Estonians migrating to Finland are more likely to be less educated than the general population of Estonia (Anniste *et al.* 2012), which suggests that the economic push to Finland is strong. However, I was surprised at how many of my interviewees had contact with Nordic countries either through their ex-partners who were living there or through having resided there themselves. The categories of migrants vs non-migrants were blurred. Surviving migration seemed to be dependent on multifaceted strategies involving both transnational movement as well as several localised strategies, which was apparent from the codes such as relying on family, migrating to earn money, help from transnational contacts etc. This encouraged the idea of 'the right to be immobile', as expressed by Forsberg (2019), as it appeared that some migrants used extensive strategies which would allow them to stay in Estonia even if this included having to temporarily migrate to Nordic countries. This article explores this concept in more depth.

Movers, temporary movers, stayers or ambivalents?

As mentioned earlier, the boundaries between moving and staying were blurred for Estonian single mothers; however, even moving could be used as a strategy which would allow a mother to stay put at a later date. In what follows, I have divided the interviewees into four categories, in terms of mobility patterns: movers, temporary movers, stayers and people who display ambivalence. I also explore the relevance of the various types of capital for these groups and will focus on the strategies that the stayers used.

Movers

Whereas not all the interviewees left Estonia due to economic difficulties, those who did were very vocal in their opinions of the Estonian state and their reasons for migrating. For instance, Anu says:

Like for many Estonians, my debts were growing, I could not handle things anymore. I was facing the possibility that I could lose everything. I needed to figure out how I could pay these debts. And then I figured

out that Finland is the best place because I could speak the language and they actually give money for working. In Estonia you do not get any money for working.

Anu was a 'victim' of the austerity policy imposed after the 2008 economic crisis. The likelihood of losing her home meant that migration seemed to be the only reasonable way out. Anu also strongly criticised the working conditions which she had in Estonia, revealing that many enterprises prefer to employ their workers on part-time contracts although the work might still be full-time. This is a successful business strategy in the countryside where the local populace struggles to find work. Anu also criticised the state for not providing sufficient social support for people who do struggle financially:

In Estonia I feel that the state helps only when you have really hit the bottom. I think it is wrong. Because then you have more people who are in a really bad situation. I think it is bad because then people will never recover from it.

Anu describes the state's help as insufficient by stating that, by the time the state is willing to help, many people have already 'sunk' beyond help. Anu did not have any other forms of capital which could help to buffer her lack of economic capital and allow her to stay in Estonia. However, she did benefit from the cultural capital of her skills in the Finnish language when moving to Finland.

As with Anu, Grete also escaped Estonia due to poverty.

In Estonia, something really positive is that one can stay at home with a child for three years.¹ But when I was still living there, there was nothing apart from child support. So how do you support yourself when you are at home? You need to have a husband who works and supports you. Especially if we look at what everything costs in Estonia. So, I had one acquaintance here in Sweden and she agreed to babysit my child so that I could work. And then I thought... I never wanted to move to Sweden but thought of it as a temporary solution. I needed to do something and then I moved. First, I was going to Sweden temporarily to make money and then go back to Estonia. And then later, [I] decided to move there.

Grete refers to the heteronormative policies in Estonia, which ignore a group as large as that of single mothers by stating that it was impossible for her to take advantage of those policies. Furthermore, she left Estonia before parental-leave benefit was introduced, meaning that the only support she had was child benefit which, today, is €60 per month but was significantly lower at the time she decided to leave. Grete's case illustrates how being in a relationship becomes a capital of sorts, offering both economic and social benefits. Grete used her social capital and entered Sweden with the help of a friend she had made in Estonia. So, although she lacked social capital in Estonia, she was able to benefit from her social network abroad.

Even though none of the mover interviewees initially intended to migrate permanently, their experiences with the strength of the welfare state as well as the somewhat more liberal societal norms in Nordic countries allowed them to acknowledge that they did not want to return to Estonia in the future. This was, for several interviewees, a still somewhat painful awareness to acknowledge, because they maintained strong connections with Estonia, regardless of the lack of either relatives or a strong social network there.

Temporary movers

Almost all my interviewees who resided abroad stated that their initial intentions were to earn some money in the host country in order to stabilise the precarity of their situation with their wish to eventually return to

Estonia. However, it was common for them to either reconsider their intentions after experiencing the social welfare regimes in the Nordic countries or to postpone their return until their children reached adulthood. However, there was also a small group of interviewees who moved with the clear intention of returning. Maile was one of them:

We went to Finland to earn money. We never really planned to stay there but my ex, he had this plan that he wanted to buy a house in Estonia. I never planned to stay in Finland, I like it in Estonia, it is my home.

Maile moved to Finland together with her ex-partner and separated from him while still living there. Her move to Finland had been motivated by the need to acquire some economic capital. After the breakup of her relationship, Maile decided to return to Estonia. On being asked if she had ever considered staying in Finland, she replied:

It is much safer here [in Estonia]. How would I have stayed with my child in Helsinki? I did not have acquaintances there. Well, some acquaintances but I did not have close friends. My dad had also left and I had no-one there. And then I thought it is much safer in Estonia with all my relatives. And my parents can help me as well.

Unlike the previous interviewees who felt safer in Finland or Sweden, Maile felt this way in Estonia. An important aspect of social networks comes into play considering that migrant mothers very often lacked a social safety net. They either had few living relatives or those whom they did have were insufficiently wealthy to be able to help. Thus, as Van Hear (2014) argues, the notion that migrating might depend on various capitals but does not necessarily demand the presence of economic capital can also be applied to remaining. When moving to Finland, Maile's priority was to acquire economic capital. However, having a child altered her priorities so that social capital became more relevant.

Maile can be distinguished from our first group of single mothers by her strong existing social network in Estonia. Her parents proved to be a great help when she moved back by providing her with both a place to live and financial help. Neither Grete nor Anu had such opportunities in Estonia and hence their move became permanent.

Stayers

As several authors have previously pointed out, the group of stayers is diverse (Clark and Lisowski 2017; Mata-Codesal 2015; Schewel 2019). The typical distinction has so far been made between voluntary and involuntary stayers; however, such a strong differentiation was not visible across my data. There was a clear socio-economic class distinction in terms of strategies employed, as noted by several interviewees, including Maria:

When you live with a second-hand contract in Tallinn, as many live who are not from Tallinn, the rent might not be much cheaper than over here [Stockholm]. So I am thinking that this single mum who is from the countryside and is moving to town with her child... it is highly likely she is not very well educated, she does not have a high salary and there is not much social support either, the rent is very high... so I am thinking for this group... living in Estonia is rather tight. So maybe then they think it is easier to come here and work as a cleaner... They earn more. But, of course, it is difficult to move with children.

Maria then notes that, for certain groups, moving is a more viable strategy than staying. She connects moving with social class, stating that – for poorer people – it is tougher to manage in Estonia, hence moving offers clearer benefits.

Another interviewee, Kersti, raises the same issue from a more reflexive point of view:

I have it really good in Estonia... It is a bit of a national pride thing... I really like living in Estonia. These are my people. They are a bit twisted but I think, somewhere else, there are others who are foreign. I don't have the drive [to befriend them]. But of course, I also don't fit the cliché of being a poor single mother. My ex-husband is paying alimony to all the children and we are managing fine.

In this way, Kersti raises the issue of agency and emphasises that, firstly, she feels a certain attachment to Estonia and to the kind of people who live there. She also, however, notes that she is able to choose to stay in Estonia – she can afford it, because she is not a poor single mother. She is aware of her 'privileged' position.

Social class issues also come out in a more subtle way, through the internalisation of certain attitudes, as Ann posits:

Sometimes you have these mothers who – they have given birth to a child alone and the child's father has already left and then they still add him to the birth certificate – and then afterwards they are sad that he is not visiting the child and asking 'How will I now manage or he is coming and taking the children away whenever he wants?' And then I say, 'You are to blame; why did you push to have him on the birth certificate?'

Ann can be perceived as having internalised the strong neoliberal norms prevalent in Estonia. She makes a judgement on women who register their former partner on the birth certificate of their child. The issue however is more complex because it is only through registration that these women can later apply for alimony from the father. Ann thus judges women who do not have the capacity to manage on their own and are therefore more or less dependent on their former partners. When I ask her to be more explicit about this judgement, she says:

Yeah, of course money was not important for me... I had a good job. I had a good income. Money was not primary. I also had good savings. Maybe if these financial issues had been important for me, I would have behaved differently.

Ann is not only aware of her privileged position but also acknowledges that her financial situation was healthy and that receiving alimony from her former partner was not a primary concern. Hence, she could choose whether or not she wanted to add him to the birth certificate.

However, there were those who were less well-off and for whom managing both financially and, to a degree, emotionally, was more challenging. The group of stayers, therefore, develop various strategies in order to 'stay' in Estonia, like Katre:

I have learned to live with my situation. It does not influence me that much anymore. I don't notice it on a daily basis but, when I look at my bank account, I do notice. But now that I have put my life together again, I don't have any money to pay back the old loans. They take all my money away and it is pretty bad because I don't want to stay in debt for the rest of my life and I am fighting against it. And then I receive a needs-based benefit and, since I owe alimony to my ex-partner, they took this away from my account.

They should not take my benefits away but they have and then you only have three days to dispute the decision. So now I have asked them to pay both salary and the needs-based benefit to my child's account so that they cannot take it away.

Katre is therefore engaging in semi-legal ways to make ends meet in Estonia. She has found that the authorities cannot locate the money she receives if she has it paid into her child's account and therefore is able to survive on a monthly basis. Katre's case shows how even single mothers in precarious positions can use cultural capital – in the form of knowledge – to survive. Here, cultural capital is translated rather liberally, through attributing it with qualities of 'know-how' in certain legal and cultural contexts. It is also useful to know that Katre, in fact, has a higher education qualification but has a part-time – 50 per cent – job in an underpaid field.

Elo has also found a semi-legal way to survive and says:

I have 50 per cent of sick leave signed by the doctors. But you can never earn enough of a living by only working 50 per cent, so that you can afford an apartment, food et cetera. And during the school year, I was working full-time and went to school as well, because my parents did not support me. But then, in the end, I could not finish high school and now it is the same. Then I was trying to find other jobs but I felt I had no choice. I had tried all kinds of things and I was so tired of barely scraping by. So, I decided to support myself by working as a prostitute.

Engaging in the informal economy is one of the alternative ways to make ends meet. Others involve arts and crafts activities such as making clothing and accoutrements (knitting, sewing, crocheting) and selling the products. Both Katre and Elo were from poor families and could not rely on the help of their relatives. However, using social networks in order to survive was probably the most common strategy, as stated by Eva:

When I was pregnant, I was looking for a living space in Tartu and then my mum offered to let me go and live with her. But I have already lived with her before – just the two of us – and I knew that I do not want to live with her. I simply cannot stand living with her. We are different in terms of what works for each of us. And then we looked at the possibilities but I could not get a loan with my salary and my mum could not get a loan because she still had a loan for this apartment. So, then my mother's partner suggested that she go to live with him – and I moved in here.

Eva thus received help from her mother in the context of living space. Although she was no longer in her early 20s and had been working for a while before her pregnancy, her salary was so low that she had to share an apartment in Tallinn. It should also be noted that, unlike Katre and Elo, Eva has a university education and was working in her specialist field. Financial struggles involve not only those individuals without higher education but also those working in underpaid sectors, mostly in education, cultural work and the like. Relatives, beyond the nuclear family, offering accommodation or other kinds of financial help was extremely common. The interesting part was that the help was more likely to have been offered through the birth family than through the father of the child. Most of the interviewees had either given up or struggled to receive alimony at the regulated rate.

Although Katre, Elo and Eva were all struggling, they do not want to leave for better economic prospects abroad, as Katre admitted:

I like it here in Estonia. I like speaking in Estonian. I don't like speaking in English. I can manage but I cannot express myself the way I wish to. I like it here, I have MY people here, MY friends. Somewhere else, it is still an unfamiliar and foreign environment.

Katre taps into the same topic which Maile earlier spoke of: Estonia with its informal social security but also, crucially, 'her people', offers her the 'safer' kind of feeling than another environment where she could potentially be more economically successful. This relates to the British working classes, whose social networks helped to buffer the insecurities of the labour market and who were therefore reluctant to move to the areas which were doing better economically (Preece 2018). Therefore, we can see how the presence of social capital becomes relevant in order to compensate for the lack of an economic one.

Ambivalents

Kris has lived in Sweden for close to a decade and has been engaged in a circular movement. She first moved to Stockholm as an au pair with the intention of learning the language and then of finding what she calls a 'proper job'. However, her job search was unsuccessful as her cultural capital (mostly an Estonian university degree) was not recognised in Sweden and she was forced to move back to Estonia. Some years later, Kris found a way to enter the Swedish labour market through her social contacts – thus, using her social capital instead – and started to slowly move upwards in her career. Despite her cultural capital having no value in the Swedish context, she managed to use her social capital to develop her career. Kris then became pregnant and moved back to Estonia during her pregnancy:

I decided to give birth in Estonia. I had a really emotionally difficult period and I had no support here [in Sweden] and then I was thinking, will I really go to the hospital and give birth alone? ... In Estonia, I do at least have my mother and supportive friends.

Even though Kris found her work in Sweden through her social networks, her experience illustrates the different levels and purposes of social capital. Kris felt that she was lacking in the emotional aspects of social capital as well as lacking recognition of her cultural capital; hence, she decided to move back during this difficult period of her pregnancy. She spent one year in Estonia, living with her mother.

After her parental leave ended, Kris was reluctant to move back to Sweden – she felt grounded in Estonia. However, financial issues came into play. Kris had to return to work for economic reasons but did not manage to find a kindergarten place in Estonia. Her subsequent return to Sweden was both economically motivated and also instigated by the lack of welfare services in Estonia in the form of childcare. Even though Kris had social capital in Estonia, she was unable to solve the problem of the purely practical side of child-rearing without an income. Kris also mentioned that many of her friends put their children into private childcare because of the absence of any state provision. However, paying for private childcare assumes the presence of two working parents in the family.

When asked today about her future, Kris says that she has no preference. She can stay in Sweden or she could move to Estonia. She is, however, reluctant to move again with her child and says that her life has become convenient in Sweden. Kris has the necessary cultural capital, which allows her to choose whether she wants to live in Sweden or Estonia. Financially, she admits that life would be better in Estonia but the aspect of the 'mobility costs' is decisive in her case.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has focused on the analysis of mobility and staying put in the context of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Its main objective has been to use existing categories of immobility and mobility to examine the CEE mobility space. More specifically, the article has explored the experiences of single mothers who make up a particularly marginalised group and investigated how they utilise different types of capital to either remain in their home countries or migrate elsewhere.

One of the main arguments presented in the article is that previous research has often overlooked the strategies employed by individuals who choose to remain in CEE countries. By considering both movers and stayers, the article provides a more comprehensive understanding of migration from the region. It emphasises that individuals who stay put in CEE countries often employ various strategies to ensure their livelihood, an aspect which tends to be overshadowed in studies that solely focus on outmigration from the region. Examining the use of different types of capital allows for a more nuanced view of the entire mobility space in CEE countries, where people employ diverse strategies to sustain their livelihoods. Migration is just one of these strategies and the decision to migrate, as well as the duration of the mobility, is influenced by access to different forms of capital.

The article also highlights the importance of social class in understanding the mobility space in CEE countries. Previous studies have indicated that individuals with lower educational levels are more likely to outmigrate from these countries, with Estonia being an exception. However, the findings from this article suggest that focusing solely on educational level or professional status may be problematic, as decisions to stay or move are not solely determined by economic capital. It is true that financial status is one motivating factor for migration but the lack of financial resources can be compensated for by extensive social networks, support systems or access to cultural capital. The distinction between these forms of capital has often been overlooked in studies on CEE migration. Furthermore, the article highlights the importance of the formalised welfare provision in Nordic countries, which serves as a significant resource for individuals with limited financial means. Thus, economically struggling single mothers in Estonia had to rely on assistance from relatives, whereas their counterparts in Nordic countries could rely on state-provided support. This sense of independence provided by the welfare systems influenced the decision-making process for several individuals, prompting them to remain in Nordic countries.

Regarding the categories of movers and stayers, the article supports previous findings which reveal that these categories are often blurred. Migration can be a temporary decision and may even facilitate future efforts to stay in a particular location. Additionally, plans can easily change as migrants experience life in a different country, as demonstrated by the examples provided in this article. The different types of capital play a crucial role in such decision-making processes. In addition to the three previously recognised types of capital – economic, social and cultural – the article has introduced the concept of formal welfare capital, which refers to the state-provided formalised assistance that entered the decision-making process for Estonian single mothers who were considering whether to stay or to move.

Overall, this article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of mobility and staying put in CEE countries by considering the experiences of single mothers and their use of different forms of capital. It emphasises the need to go beyond the educational level and professional status when studying migration and highlights the significance of social class and welfare provisions in shaping mobility decisions.

Note

1. Estonia grants parental leave to those who have worked for 3 years, with the legal condition that they must be able to return to their work at the end of their period of leave.


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Appendix

Table of interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Place of residence	No. of children	Profession
Anu	33	Stockholm	1	Government official
Kaire	31	Tallinn (lived in Finland)	2	Library worker
Ele	41	Tallinn	2	Bookkeeper
Terje	44	Tallinn	2	NGO worker
Katre	33	Estonian small town	1	Unemployed
Signe	42	Estonian small town	1	Police officer
Marje	47	Tallinn	1	Janitor
Lili	33	Tallinn	3	Bookkeeper
Aune	31	Stockholm	1	Hotel worker
Emma	39	Swedish small town	2	Nurse
Aile	37	Tallinn (lived in Finland)	1	Kindergarten teacher
Linda	31	Tallinn (lived in Sweden)	2	Police officer
Ragne	46	Finish small town	2	Nurse
Elo	36	Stockholm	2	Administrator
Kaie	23	Tallinn	1	Prostitute
Sindi	36	Helsinki	2	Unemployed
Kaidi	24	Tallinn	2	Factory worker
Andra	23	Tallinn	2	Unemployed
Raili	36	Tartu	1	Bookkeeper
Maria	36	Tallinn	4	Administrator
Ellen	51	Tallinn	1	Unemployed
Indra	44	Tartu	2	Bookkeeper
Petra	24	Finish small town	1	Home helper
Karoli	23	Finish small town	1	Cleaner

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