
Intra-EU youth mobility: aspirations and reality of return migration to Latvia

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Abstract

Intra-EU mobility is a multifaced process, entailing various forms of mobility, including cross-border commuting, seasonal and other short-term migration, as well as circular and more permanent migration. Indeed, contemporary migration patterns in Europe show an increase in, and diversification of, migrant flows as a result of differences in wealth levels, the removal of restrictions on the free movement of labour, reduced transportation and communication costs, the expansion of formal and informal labour recruitment networks, and initiatives by governments and employers to recruit labour into specific economic sectors. Besides, all of these mobility forms coexists in a rapidly changing landscape of European migration. All across Europe young people are among the most mobile groups and intra-EU mobility has been composed of a high share of youth. Since the first EU enlargement towards the East in 2004, both rural regions and urban areas of Latvia have witnessed the large-scale emigration of young and skilled people. In the following years, out-migration from Latvia has been associated with the economic recession that occurred due to the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. The return migration of Latvian nationals in recent years has increased but remains modest. The ultimate outcome of youth return migration depends on whether the returnees have accumulated or depleted their human, financial and social capital during their migration experience. Against this backdrop our study discusses migration aspirations, previous experience and actual return behaviour of Latvian youth. We aim to explore the relationship between migration aspirations and actual behaviour considering the connections between return and circular migration. The focus is on the geographical mobility of young adults (defined as those aged between 16 and 35). At the same time, we acknowledge that ‘youth’ and ‘young adults’ are flexible categories. The quantitative and qualitative analyses of our study are based on several data sets including the results derived from the Horizon2020 YOMOBILITY project. The results highlight the differences between Latvians, depending on their willingness (or not) to return. The observed increase in circular patterns reveals that Latvians benefit from their stay abroad. Our findings suggest that young returnees perceive migration as valuable and enriching experience. We also distinguish our results between mobile students and higher- and lower-skilled workers.

Keywords: youth mobility, return migration, Latvia

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