SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Onward Migration Aspirations and Transnational Practices of Migrant Construction Workers Amidst Economic Crisis: Exploring New Opportunities and Facing Barriers

Iraklis Dimitriadis (ORCID)

University of Milan, Milano

Abstract

Considering onward migration aspirations of Albanian migrants in Italy and Greece, this article investigates the reproduction of transnational practices in relation to preferred destinations before new settlements take place. Drawing on qualitative data, it introduces the concept of explorative transnational practices and sheds light on the interplay between aspirations and transnationalism, showing how the desire to leave the first country may be shaped by transnational ties, and how this may trigger occasional transnational physical activity to explore new destinations. On one hand, this version of transnational mobility may engender remigration, but, on the other, this may be transformed into income-oriented work trips due to structural constraints (legal status, immigrant networks) and a lack of linguistic and economic capital, as well as other factors such as integration processes, intergenerational relationships and experiences in new destinations. This questions the very presumptions of the transnationalist approach that underscore agentic dimensions of transnational migrants.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the creation of transnational social spaces is considered of great relevance in enabling onward migration across the EU (McIlwaine, 2012), that is remigration from the first country of destination in which migrants

are settled to a new one. In the aftermath of the Great Recession, onward migration emerges as a reactive strategy to cope with unemployment and precariousness in Southern European countries, and it is driven by aspirations to find better job and career opportunities and a desire to escape discrimination or racism (Estevez et al., 2018; Mas Giralt, 2017; Ramos, 2018). Mobilizing their dual citizenship, migrants rely on transnational social ties to collect information about the labour market and get support for practical issues in new destinations. Yet, the literature lacks attention to the stages of migration as theorized by Friberg (2012), who emphasizes the relevance of transnational mobility before permanent settlement. According to this author, temporary work abroad and transnational commuting often come prior to the manifestation of migration and shape decisions on settlement or not. Thus, little is known about the relation between onward migration aspirations and transnational mobility within restrictive migration regimes (Ahrens et al., 2016).

This article aims to address this gap through the examination of the aspirations of potential onward migrants and their transnational practices that are activated to realize remigration. By recognizing the significant role of aspirations in eliciting migration (Carling & Schewel, 2018), it draws on onward migration aspirations of Albanians who live in Italy and Greece, and it suggests that such aspirations, which have emerged from the need to cope with the effects economic crisis of the late 2000s, are shaped by social expectations and identities and are influenced by transnational ties through the exchange of information across distances. Before deciding to remigrate though, aspirant onward migrants may undertake physical transnational activities to explore preferred destinations. Such activities can be understood through the concept of 'explorative transnational practices' which is introduced in this article. These practices are realized by migrants across transnational social spaces between Italy or Greece and a range of different countries, sometimes including their homeland. Explorative transnational practices emerge as a particular version of transnational practice because they comprise occasional visits or short trips to work abroad and are characterized by openness, complexity, unpredictability, dynamism and a reactive aspect; they are activated as a response to economic exclusion or precariousness in the first destination (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2018; Ramos, 2020). These practices can result in remigration or can reconfigure aspirations when migrants evaluate that new destinations cannot meet their needs and desires. Onward migration aspirations, as well as transnational practices, are also shaped by structural constraints (legal status, migrant networks), other factors such as integration processes, intergenerational relationships and lived experiences of transnational mobility in the preferred destination. When aspirations are affected by such barriers, onward migration is not realized and explorative transnational practices may be transformed into income-oriented practices (work trips abroad to accumulate financial capital) with negative implications. This transformation calls into question the agency and the active role of social actors within transnational spaces.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section, I introduce the concepts and theoretical framework used in this article. After this, I provide information on methods and context, and I proceed with the analysis of aspirations of onward migration and their interplay with transnational mobility, the role of explorative transnational practices and the constraints impeding onward migration. In the conclusive section, I highlight the main contributions of this article and reflect on limitations, future research goals and policy recommendations.

TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL FIELDS, ONWARD MIGRATION AND ASPIRATIONS TO MIGRATE

Over the last three decades, migration scholars have established the study of transnationalism, which Basch et al. (1994:4) defined as 'the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement'. The transnationalism framework adopted an agency-oriented approach which sees migrant have an active role in promoting socio-economic development of their country of origin (Ambrosini, 2014; de Haas, 2010). Yet, instead of talking about transnationalism that is seen to be limited

to migrant elites supporting their homelands financially or politically (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005), Levitt and Glick-Schiller (2004: 1009) suggested the notion of 'transnational social fields' defined as a 'set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged, organized and transformed' and which connect people across national borders. These authors also placed emphasis on migration regimes and labour market structures that regulate transnational practices.

With respect to the European context, the notion has been linked with the phenomenon of circulatory transnationalism (Ambrosini, 2014) that comprises the physical presence of migrants in host and receiving countries by travelling back and forth for economic activities (i.e. agriculture, construction). This often happens when migrants fulfil some of their initial objectives, thus supporting the development of their homelands, but also after return migration, in the sense that returnees benefit from their knowledge and networks in both countries to undertake economic or civic activities.

Existing studies on onward migration focus on the resources that migrants mobilize to achieve a secondary migration, highlighting the importance of transnational social networks in providing information on job opportunities and situations in the desired destination (Mas Giralt, 2017; McIlwaine, 2012). Already settled fellow nationals also provide accommodation and emotional support to newly arrived onward migrants, as well as help with respect to the latter's civic status.

Although the emphasis has been on transnational ties, little is known about how physical transnational activities, and especially transnational commuting, interplay with decisions to migrate onward. In his study on Polish construction workers, Friberg (2012) introduced a distinction of three stages of migration: the first stage comprises temporary work abroad and is often followed by open-ended transnational commuting before the final stage of permanent settlement. However, structural constraints (i.e. difficulty in accessing regular job contracts), network functioning (i.e. mistrust or inability to provide access to jobs) or emotions (i.e. suffering from separation from families) may shape migrants' desire and ability to settle abroad (see also Della Puppa, 2016).

To analyse migrants' aspirations for onward migration, this article draws on the work of Carling and colleagues. Migration aspiration is defined as 'a conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration' (Carling & Schewel, 2018: 2), that is 'leaving would be better than staying' (Carling & Collins, 2018: 7). This term is often used interchangeably with desires, wishes, preferences or intentions and can refer to projects either out of choice or coercion. According to these authors, migration aspirations can be examined under three lenses. First, these can be seen as a form of attitude, that is a psychological tendency (balance between stability and volatility) in relation to the evaluation of migration – favourably or not. This evaluation often concerns comparison of different places based on 'locally existing ideas and meanings attached to these' (Carling & Collins, 2018: 9). Second, migration aspirations are considered in relation to various culturally defined projects because the migration project is socially constructed and entails particular expectations (i.e. when migration is seen as a step that young males have to undertake). Third, aspirations for migration may be connected to one's personhood or identity in the sense that projects may be linked to the aspiration for sharing the meanings attached to the figure of the migrant. Put this way, it is important to underline that migration aspirations do not always result in actual mobility, as some people may lack the ability to do so (involuntary non-migrants) or may evaluate that non-migration is preferable to migration (voluntary non-migrants).

What emerges from the above definition is that aspirations are shaped by structural elements and are embedded in social norms and expectations. On the one hand, migration aspiration and ability can be constrained or enabled by social, economic and political factors. Economic resources of potential migrants or migration policies can shape aspirations and limit ability to migrate. On the other hand, migration aspirations can mirror gendered roles such as the role of care, obligations and identities (i.e. construction of masculinity) (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Della Puppa, 2018). Finally, three further aspects seem to shape and determine migration aspiration, namely time, emotions and networks. Time refers to the fact that decisions are not always taken in a certain moment, as aspiration may be future-oriented. Scholarship on emotions also suggests that states of feelings, such as attachment to certain places, affect aspirations (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). Last but not least, it is well evidenced how mediating actors have a crucial role in shaping migration plans (Ambrosini, 2017).

METHODS AND CONTEXTS

This study is part of a larger research project on how Albanian migrant construction workers in Italy and in Greece have coped with the economic recession since 2008. Fieldwork for the research was conducted from March 2015 to August 2016. The article draws upon 61 in-depth interviews with male Albanian construction workers and employers residing in Milan (29) and Athens (32), and field notes collected during instances of non-participant observation (i.e. participation in trade union assemblies, cultural events organized by immigrant associations and a short trip to Albania to meet my participants when they were back for holidays). Access to participants was possible through cultural associations, community events, trade unionists and personal contacts, whereas some respondents were accessed through snowball techniques. Interviews were conducted face to face in Italian and Greek and took place in Milan, Athens and their satellite cities. Quotations used in the findings were translated into English.

Migrants' ages ranged widely, from 27 to 63 years: 5 participants were under 30 years old, unmarried and without children, 49 of them were between 30 and 50 years old, and 7 participants were over fifty. Those over 30 years old were married with two or three children. Twenty out of 29 Albanian migrants in Italy were holders of the EU long-term residence permit, 4 had been granted a two-year residence permit, 4 were Italian citizens, and one reported having an undocumented status. In the case of Greece, 15 out of 32 respondents possessed a 10-year stay permit (a long-term permit but without the right to work in any other country), 9 had a short-term stay permit (from one to five years), 1 possessed the EU long-term residence permit, and 6 had Greek citizenship. All respondents were settled migrants and had lived in Italy and Greece for at least 10 years, and the majority of them had migrated during the 1990s.

Until the 2010s, emigration of Albanians to Europe was realized in three phases. The first phase concerns those who fled Albania after the collapse of Hoxha's regime in early 1990s. The majority of the first migrants settled and worked in Greece and Italy, irregularly benefiting from the widespread informal economy in construction and agriculture (Ambrosini, 2018). The economic crisis in Albania in 1997 triggered the second phase of numerous flows towards Greece and Italy, whereas the third one is connected to the Kosovo war in 1998 (King and Vullnetari, 2012). Informal patterns of accessing labour markets were of relevance in these two phases too. Nowadays, the biggest part of the Albanian diaspora resides in Italy and Greece (almost 75% of Albanian emigrants – more than one million people), whereas Germany and Switzerland host a significant number of Albanian immigrants (300,000 and 100,000, respectively).

The settlement of Albanians in Italy and Greece was challenged by the 2008 crisis, and this significantly impacted the construction sector. Investment in Italian residential construction for new buildings decreased by 62.4 per cent from 2008 to 2015, and almost 44.5 per cent of formal construction workers became unemployed from 2009 to 2014 (Dimitriadis, 2017). In the case of Greece, the activity in the construction sector shrank from 2007 to 2016, as according to the Hellenic Statistical Authority, the number of private building permits and the volume of private building activities dropped by almost 85 per cent. In this context, the high presence of Albanian males in the construction sector in Italy and Greece made the study of this migrant group crucial. In 2014, almost 84 per cent of the total migrant workforce in the Greek construction sector were Albanians, and they represented the most numerous non-EU migrant group in the Italian one (20% of the total migrant workforce).

With regard to some features of the Italian and the Greek construction sectors, they are characterized by high percentages of informal work (Cremers et al., 2017). On the one hand, this enabled the migrants insertion into the labour market and their regularization through 'amnesty programmes' (Ambrosini, 2018), but, on the other hand, this deprived the workers of the protection of labour laws or social security provisions. Though employment contracts differ in the two contexts since the Italian legislation provides waged employment that includes full-time and part-time contracts, construction workers in Greece are employed on a daily basis, which lends itself to further informal arrangements (Maroukis et al., 2011).

TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICES OF ALBANIANS AND ONWARD MIGRATION

Research on Albanian migration patterns highlights the main aspects shaping transnational ties of Albanians with their homeland. Geographic proximity between Albania and Greece or Italy has played a central role in favouring various forms of transnational practices such as material, financial and social remittances or circulating back and forth for economic activities (Gemi, 2014, 2016; Michail, 2013; Vathi, 2015). With reference to the construction sector, circularity concerns, on the one hand, the moves of migrant entrepreneurs from Italy who often set up a parallel firm in their home country and, on the other hand, the moves of workers from Greece who work as employees (Mai & Paladini, 2013; Maroukis & Gemi, 2013). Since December 2011, transnational physical mobility has been facilitated because Schengen visa restrictions were lifted for Albanian citizens, conferring on them the right to travel within the Schengen zone with a tourist visa lasting up to 3 months.

Focussing on the impact of the Great Recession on transnational practices of Albanians residing in Italy and Greece, Gemi (2014, 2016) noted a rupture. This discontinuity largely entails the decreasing availability of capital to sustain development and business activities in Albania. According to the author, the flow of remittances to Albania has significantly decreased, and as a result, migrants could not continue practices of a transnational dimension, such as building houses in their home country, financing family economic activities or undertaking trade activities. On the contrary, many of them (more common among those in Greece) decided to return temporarily (with or without their families) to their country of origin, being in a state of limbo, or to move back and forth to carry out occasional jobs in order to sustain their family income or to remain documented (Mai & Paladini, 2013).

Last but not least, Albanians decided to migrate onward in order to cope with the crisis (Karamoschou, 2018). This mainly concerns those living in Greece who used their newly acquired EU citizenship to move to Germany or the UK in order to find better economic opportunities. Karamoschou highlighted the central role that social networks played in providing help upon arrival and information about job opportunities, but little is known about how transnational bonds played a role in decisions related to new migration.

ONWARD MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS TRIGGERING EXPLORATIVE TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICES TO NEW DESTINATIONS

During the Great Recession, migrant construction workers in Greece and Italy experienced job loss and under-employment, and company closures or non-payment of services by customers also involved not paying compensation to workers. Salary cuts and the shrinking of social benefits imposed through the economic adjustment programmes for Greece affected construction workers too. In this context, not being able to sustain their households, many Albanian construction workers considered leaving their first destination and moving to other European countries, aiming to escape precarity and overcome a marginalized socio-economic status. This is in line with findings of other recent research arguing that economic precarity underpinned onward migration, especially among men who were employed in the construction sector (Bermudez & Oso, 2019; Ramos, 2020). This is the case of Isuf in Milan who remigrated to Belgium:

> I had no other chance. What if there are no jobs? I didn't pay the rent for eight months (in Italy). There was zero work. Even if you work, they (employers) don't give you the money… a period of almost nothing. In one year, I worked just one day and a half.
>
> (aged 39, long-term EU resident, Italy)

Experiences of discrimination and socio-economic exclusion in the receiving country are considered to favour the reproduction of transnational ties with the homeland, which is called 'reactive transnationalism' (Itzigshon &

Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005). Transnational practices are developed by migrants who aim to retain an identification in their home country when suffering exclusion or lacking recognition of their social status in the receiving society. The findings of this research suggest that migrants who experience economic exclusion are also engaged in transnational commuting because they aim to make a new start to find employment in a new destination that can sustain themselves and their families. Such aspirations are often informed by transnational ties before transnational physical mobility takes place thanks to telephone calls or digital social media and telecommunications applications. Armend describes how he collected information about new destinations:

> I've heard that the situation has changed in Italy. The market conditions have been very favourable for the last year and a half. [...] My brothers work 6–7 days per month. They're self-employed workers. I won't have the right to work, but I can stay there for three months. [...] I've talked many times with them and my cousins on Skype. We're talking about the work here (Greece) and there (Italy). They always say to me, 'Come! Just come to see!'
>
> (aged 43, two-year stay permit, Greece)

It is important to underline here that some of the respondents in Greece often aspired to remigrate to Italy – but not vice versa – where they could rely on relatives to find employment. This reflects that the economic situation in the Greek labour market in the years of recession was perceived as worse than that in Italy. In the same vein, it was more common that some of the respondents who had stable employment during the crisis in Milan, which is located in a region where migrants suffered fewer impacts of the economic crisis in comparison with other Italian cities (Dimitriadis, 2017), had different aspirations than their fellow migrants in Athens when considering onward migration. Instead of aspiring to escape from precariousness, they often desired to achieve professional development and upward socio-economic mobility. These were often migrants who had obtained long-term EU residence permits or EU citizenship.

Transnational ties initially inform aspirations for onward migration that, in turn, are transformed into transnational physical mobility, not only between the home and host country but also between Italy and Greece and new European destinations. Many of my respondents who considered migrating onward situated their visits to co-national fellows and friends living across Europe as an initial step before deciding to remigrate. Such transnational visits have an occasional and fragmented character and consist of collecting information about the situation in the local labour market and housing and of evaluating how life is in the country to which they desire to remigrate. The reproduction of these practices as a step towards the realization of (onward) migration comes earlier than the 'initial stage of migration' proposed by Friberg (2012), that is a short time period of working abroad. In the words of Faton,

> I've gone abroad several times. I went to Belgium to a friend of mine to check out the situation. I'm a good head of the family; I can't take the whole family with me like many others do.
>
> (aged 40, ten-year stay permit, Greece)

In taking this account into consideration, it can be suggested that transnational mobility is embedded in time and gendered relations. On the one hand, as these practices are repeated across time, decision-making seems to be a temporally distributed process and does not occur at a singular moment in time (Carling & Schewel, 2018). On the other hand, issues of gender are central because explorative transnational visits between the host society and a new destination have been continually represented as 'men's business'. In line with the increasing attention to gender issues in transnational research, such representations may indicate men's attempts to fulfil expectations of their role and identities (Datta et al., 2009; Della Puppa, 2016). Albanian migration has historically built upon the gendered division of labour (Papailias, 2003). In the collective historical memory of Albanians, men used to emigrate in order to maintain an income of subsistence in times of harshness or to escape Ottoman persecution (Vullnetari, 2012).

Many participants also used to spend short periods abroad working in the construction sector (Friberg, 2012), so they had direct experience in the local labour market. In this regard, an interesting aspect concerns the nature of the ties that they use to access resources and create transnational social spaces. The above quotations confirm previous research that highlights the importance of strong social ties and the limited relevance of weak social ties (such as immigrant associations) (Mai & Paladini, 2013; Vathi, 2015). Yet, Isuf's account reflects the central role that professional ties with natives may have for settled migrants in a new migratory episode. Within the context of increasing EU mobility (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017), migrants can rely on EU nationals who leave their homelands to escape rampant unemployment rates. In this regard, the relevance of informal networking in the recruitment process in the construction sector should be underlined since informal social network practices not only permit the flow of information with little or no financial cost but also guarantee the skills and character of the workers (Thiel, 2012).

> The first time I went there, I went by car with my boss. He knew how I work and wanted to take me with him... [...] At that time, I didn't have the right documents to work, but my boss made me register for an Italian VAT number, and in this way, I got the residence permit.
>
> (aged 39, long-term EU resident, Italy)

Another hallmark of the construction sector enables access for brief or longer periods to construction work, which is prevalent among the informal and atypical relations between employers and workers (Friberg, 2012), and prevalent in the undeclared economy (Cremers et al., 2017). Typically, most of my interviewees recounted their work experiences as irregular construction workers in new destinations very freely. This recalls the centrality of 'migratory knowledge', that is accumulated experience on how to navigate a new country (Martiniello & Rea, 2014; Ramos, 2018). Adnan, who worked informally several times in the German and Austrian construction sector, recounts,

> in Austria and in Southern Germany you can work in the black market . But you get half of the money (that one should be paid as regular worker). He (the employer or mediator) tells you, for instance, '25 euro for this job, 12.5 for me and 12.5 for you'. When the comptroller arrives, you tell 'My name is Kohl'. You work under another's name (false work card), you have a false copy to get the daily pay. You can work very easily. [...] You can receive a good daily pay, and you can remain satisfied even if also the other (employer or mediator) gets some money.
>
> (aged 40, three-year stay permit, Greece)

The above citations concern mobility from the first country of migration and the country to which migrants aspire to remigrate, but transnational social fields may be much more complex when movements also include their homeland (Bermudez & Oso, 2019). Although such connections can be interpreted by adopting the reactive transnationalism approach, home-destination connections arise in my participants' stories as part of migrants' intentions for onward migration too. While family or some family members move back and forth between home and receiving country or temporarily stay in Albania to save money, men were moving to new destinations to explore job opportunities.[1.] For instance, after almost one year of unemployment in Athens, Alban returned with his wife and two children to Albania and stayed at his grandparents' home. He found occasional jobs in construction and agriculture, and he also went to Italy to work and explore job opportunities. In his words,

> while I was in Albania, I did various jobs... whatever there was... building sites, agriculture... [...] My brother-in-law was in Italy, and he helped me to go and look for a job. Indeed, I found a job, and he also gave me accommodation for the period I stayed there. I stayed in Italy for a month and a half, and I worked for 20 days. I wanted to try [...] Sometimes, I think about it (sarcastically laughs)... how

the hell did I do all this stuff in two and a half years... to be in Albania, Greece, Italy, back to Albania and then to Greece?

(aged 34, ten-year stay permit, Greece)

Explorative transnational practices engendered onward migration when there was certainty about finding a satisfactory job in the new destination. For instance, Isuf moved with his family to Belgium, after having been previously there for occasional work. However, after one year of remigration, they returned to Italy due to the irregularity of his family status in the new destination. Such structural constraints, as well as other barriers, reconfigure aspirations and the nature of transnational mobility as analysed in the following section.

BARRIERS TO ONWARD MIGRATION AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF ASPIRATIONS AND TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICES

Although Isuf was an EU long-term resident, he worked in the Belgian construction sector as an undeclared worker for one year. When he and his wife realized that getting regular immigrant status in Belgium was not feasible for the latter, they decided to return to Italy also because his wife was at risk of lapsing into irregularity in the first destination too. In his words:

...my wife had a two-year residence permit (in Italy) that was about to expire. (If I continued working in Belgium under these conditions) I would 'burn' my wife's documents. My daughter was also growing up ... you have to speak either Italian or Belgian... it's difficult to change schools. I said that it was better to go back.

I: If you had a residence permit in Belgium...

R: I wouldn't return to Italy, not even for holidays! Not even for holidays!

(aged 39, long-term EU resident, Italy)

This example shows some of the constraints in being mobile for non-EU migrants with precarious legal status in the EU (Moret, 2016; Moroksavic, 2004), thus highlighting the importance of mobilizing dual citizenship to move to a new destination (Della Puppa & King, 2019; McIlwaine & Bunge, 2018; Ramos, 2018). This does not imply that migrants deprived of EU citizenship do not create new transnationals spaces to explore opportunities or work in new destinations, but decisions for permanent settlement may depend on legal status. Inability to secure legal status that would permit onward migration during the recession was recurrent in both Italy and Greece due to high unemployment rates and the existing link between job contract and employment in relation to stay permit renewal (Bonizzoni, 2017; Dimitriadis 2018; Gemi, 2016). However, it seems that Albanians in Greece have been affected worse by a rigid migration regime than those in Italy as recent studies demonstrate (Danaj & Çaro, 2016; Gemi, 2014). In the case of Albanian construction workers, getting a long-term stay permit or Greek citizenship could be even more difficult also due to precarious day-labour contracts (Dimitriadis 2017).

At the same time, the previous quotation shows how structural constraints may be entangled with other factors, such as intergenerational relationships (Bermudez & Oso, 2019). Although a significant body of literature suggests that onward migration is a strategy to offer better future opportunities to offspring (Della Puppa & King, 2019), those with children might perceive transnational experiences (and remigration) as something that disrupts their children's lives. My participants' accounts confirm what has been claimed about the difficulties that a new move (or return) implies, such as learning a new language, adapting to a new context and a detached first

destination country (Cena et al., 2018; Ramos, 2020). It was common for my respondents in both contexts to be reluctant to migrate onward as a new movement would disturb the stability of their children's lives. The following sayings were frequent in their narratives: 'Our children are happy here; they were born here, they have their friends, and they wouldn't like to go anywhere else'. Similarly, Vathi (2015) suggested that children's attachment to the host society, and in particular identification with the locality, hindered parents' return plans.

Integration among first-generation Albanian migrants could be considered an additional factor reconfiguring aspirations for or hampering onward migration.[2] Both in Greece and Italy, Albanians' social integration has been considered successful (Danaj & Çaro, 2016; Gemi, 2016), and this is reflected in my participants' lifestyle considerations and references to the attachment to the local context when contemplating remigration in spite of precariousness and economic hardship (Dimitriadis 2020). For instance, Lavdrim, who lives close to Milan and was underemployed for long periods, underlined that moving away from his place would imply losing his friendships and the possibility to play volleyball on a local team. Similarly, Adnan, who was engaged in transnational commuting to explore opportunities in the Austrian construction sector, referred to sociality after the workday that is common in the Greek context where construction workers stop working at 3 p.m.:

> You know, you don't have so many days off in Austria. Your only day off is Saturday. Sunday is a workday. […] life is so different. Work is from morning until evening. No beer, no mezé (a kind of Greek tapas) in the afternoon after work.
>
> (aged 43, three-year stay permit, Greece)

Another barrier to onward migration can be the failure of informal networks to provide support for remigration. As far as it concerns the two case studies presented in this article, transnational practices seem to reshape aspirations for onward migration, as there were some respondents who realized that they could not access jobs on a permanent basis after moving to a new destination to explore labour market opportunities. Alban, whose EU long-term residence permit could permit him to get a regular job contract in Italy, failed to find a job there because the firm of his brother-in-law upon which he relied went bankrupt:

> I stayed in Italy for a month and a half, and I worked for 20 days. I wanted to try… After the summer, I returned to Albania with my brother-in-law due to the failure of his own firm. He hadn't paid some taxes, so he opted to return home.
>
> (aged 46, two-year stay permit, Greece)

Negative working experiences during transnational practices in the preferred destination also impacted on plans for onward migration. Discrimination, poor working conditions or tension with new colleagues was reported by some of my participants. Zamir worked for one month in the shipbuilding industry in France while he was unemployed in Greece. Lack of trust among colleagues and pressure exercised by employers resulted in skepticism towards onward migration. Other participants also realized that new contexts were not so welcoming and that they could be entrapped in precarious working and living conditions in onward migration destinations (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2018; Ramos, 2020):

> Z: We (he and some friends of him) stayed in France for one month. It was a good experience but… how to say it… there were so many brown-nosers (colleagues), shit! I cannot understand why! They also put so much pressure on us: 'Come on, we have to finish' before you had even started. Why they do like this? Good work takes time to do.
>
> I: Do you still consider leaving Greece?

Z: Look... it's not that easy... we don't speak the language; this worries us too.

(aged 47, EU citizenship, Greece)

The above quotation also reveals that a lack of linguistic competences can be a factor affecting plans for onward migration. My participants often represented this issue as an obstacle to realize remigration, as this is connected with a risk of frustration, downward mobility and precarity as documented in recent studies (Mas Giralt, 2017; Ramos, 2020). This risk could be higher among construction workers due to low education levels and non-transferability of their skills to different sectors. Last but not least, difficulty in accessing economic resources to realize a new settlement was referred to as another deterrent to leaving the first destination.

Structural constraints and other factors that have been mentioned thus far may impact on migrants' prospects and plans for onward migration and may reshape the characteristics of transnational mobility. Indeed, the transnational physical practices of my participants might not share anymore the 'exploration' feature but could be characterized as income-oriented activities. In other words, instead of triggering actual onward migration, the creation of transnational social fields resulted in favouring short-term informal work trips to accumulate financial capital. Transnational mobility was then driven by the need to gain or save money (Morrison & Sacchetto, 2014; Perrotta, 2011). A telling example was provided by Adnan when he realized that he could not obtain the long-term EU stay permit, and his chances for onward migration were almost null:

You are required to have a five-year residence permit to work there (in Austria). I wanted to convert it from 3 to 5 years, but now I cannot because I don't have the required welfare stamps. I applied for them, I was waiting, but the card didn't arrive. So, without the documents and since I do not intend to settle in Austria, I worked in the black market and got the money.

(aged 43, three-year stay permit, Greece)

Although it has been argued that such practices may indicate agency that 'is manifested through the expansion of strategic options and geographic destinations' (Morrison & Sacchetto, 2014:29), such temporary and fragmented income-oriented transnational practices have negative practical implications. First, this type of transnational mobility exposes income-seeking people to exploitation as regards reimbursement (salary withholding) and to vulnerability as they work unregistered or with false documents. This consolidates employers' control and puts workers at risk of accidents and deprives them of access to health and welfare security. Second, short-term benefits of work trips do not contribute to integration in the first destination and may put in jeopardy the legal status of migrants who need to demonstrate formal employment. Third, migrants may feel alienated in the context where they move to work (also due to trouble with communication), and separation from the family may have emotional implications (Ramos, 2020). Therefore, migrants may be entrapped in such transnational activities, leading to further precariousness and marginalization. This is in contrast to the literature on transnationalism assuming that people who move within social transnational fields are active agents able to transform social structures and localities through their actions and ideas.

CONCLUSIONS

This article focussed on Albanian migrants' aspirations for onward migration and their transnational practices to manifest their intentions in observable migration. In so doing, it explored the temporal connections and interplay between onward migration (aspirations) and transnational mobilities prior to settling in a new destination. Transnational ties may affect onward migration aspirations, which are translated into the desire to escape precarious conditions and poverty for the majority of my respondents, whereas those few migrants (mainly in Italy) with stable formal contracts may aspire to professional development and upward socio-economic mobility. Then,

aspirations may trigger the reproduction of explorative transnational practices. As potential onward migrants feel the need to be sure about job opportunities and life in the new destination, they prefer to rely on their own direct transnational experiences by occasionally visiting relatives or working for short periods abroad. While explorative transnational practices can result in actual onward migration, transnational experiences, along with structural constraints and other factors, may affect initial aspirations for onward migration and may also reconfigure transnational mobility, in the sense that physical activity back and forth to a third country may be continued as a money-oriented practice with negative practical implications for migrants.

Reconfigurations of transnational physical mobility may entail further precariousness and marginalization, which leads to a critique of the principles of the transnationalist approach in migration studies depicting migrants as active agents and of making assumptions about the positive impact on sending societies. As shown, barriers to onward migration – those linked to immigrants' legal status, migrant networks, lack of cultural or economic capital or other factors and lived experiences, such as integration processes in the first destination or bad working conditions in the preferred destination – and reconfigurations of transnational mobility have little to do with representations of transnational migrants as active agents who transfer and create ideas, values and practices which can change social structures and localities.

By introducing the concept of explorative transnational practices, this article also added a slightly nuanced version of transnational mobility, thus contributing both to the literature of aspirations and to the literature on onward migration. These practices are defined as occasional visits or (short) work trips to countries that migrants aspire to remigrate to in order to explore new job opportunities and/or to evaluate the feasibility of onward migration. When explorative transnational practices are undertaken as a reaction to precariousness in the host country, these may also comprise multi-sited linkages with the home country; temporary return can be a way to save money before onward mobility takes place. This kind of transnational mobility differs from circular migration movements, as it is characterized by chance, unpredictability, openness and fragmentation. These practices may be common before embarking on a more permanent move or they can reconfigure aspirations for remigration when a new movement is evaluated as unfeasible or not desirable anymore. Explorative transnational practices may also reveal a gendered dimension insofar as they are associated with men's expected social role in the migration process.

From a methodological point of view, it can be argued that the selection of a sample with migrants employed in a specific economic sector brought to the fore interesting results. On the one hand, the empirical material has revealed how migrants can rely on professional connections with native colleagues in the first destination to activate transnational mobility or to migrate onward, as informal networks are central to the recruitment process. This illustrated a link between EU and non-EU or new EU citizens' migration. On the other hand, ease of access to informal jobs in the construction sector and migrants' knowledge on how to navigate informal labour markets were crucial to the reproduction of explorative transnational mobility and onward migration.

Although the focus on a specific sector can provide contributions, this is not without limitations as a more differentiated sample in terms of education, skills, gender and generation could provide deeper insights into aspirations, gender patterns and intergenerational dynamics. Future research could also explore and assess the relevance of onward migration in relation to non-EU nationals who are long-term residents, as well as those with precarious or irregular legal status. More attention should be also paid to the stage before migrants settle in a new destination to deeply evaluate the reasons for which potential onward migrants decide to move or not. Finally, ethnographic techniques could offer deeper insights into transnational mobility (Morrison & Sacchetto, 2014) to build upon the concept of explorative transnational practices.

Given the economic hardship that migrants suffer during periods of crisis and the imminent impact of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis on economies, Italy and Greece should reconsider their restrictive migration policies by making long-term resident permits and citizenship more accessible in order to guarantee both the right to mobility and work across Schengen countries and to secure immigrant status in the host country. Next to this, initiatives that promote dialogue between EU countries on labour market shortages would facilitate the mobility of aspirant

onward migrants and enable formal employment. A solution could thus be the introduction of invitation schemes that render possible legal entry for work, providing the opportunity to migrants to explore a new labour market without the risk of further marginalization.

Peer Review

ORCID

Iraklis Dimitriadis https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4415-8275

ENDNOTES

1. Aspirations to escape precariousness in Italy and Greece by opting for remigration to a new EU destination do not exclude the possibility of return. In line with other research, temporary transfer to Albania was not only a means to reduce expenses in the host country but also to evaluate the feasibility of return. This pattern was more common among Albanians in Greece (Gemi, 2016).

2. This was more common among those who would not risk lapsing into irregularity. Yet, some authors claimed that one of the effects of the Great Recession was a disintegration process linked to the inability to renew legal immigrant status (mostly in the case of Greece, see Gemi, 2014).

REFERENCES

Ahrens, J., M. Kelly and I. van Liempt 2016 "Free movement? The onward migration of EU citizens born in Somalia, Iran, and Nigeria", *Population, Space and Place*, 22: 84–98.

Ambrosini, M. 2014 "Migration and transnational commitment: Some evidence from the Italian case", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(4): 619–637.

—— 2017 "Why irregular migrants arrive and remain: the role of intermediaries", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(11): 1813–1830.

Ambrosini, 20182018 *Immigration in Southern Europe. Actors, Dynamics and Governance.* Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK.

Basch, L.G., N. Glick Schiller and C. Blanc-Szanton 1994 *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Post-colonial Predicaments, and De-territorialized Nation-States.* Gordon and Breach, Langhorne, PA.

Bermudez, A. and L. Oso 2019 ""Kites" and "anchors": The (im)mobility strategies of transnational Latin American families against the crisis in Spain", *Population, Space and Place*, 25: e2221. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2221

Boccagni, P. and L. Baldassar 2015 "Emotions on the move: Mapping the emergent field of emotion and migration", *Emotion, Space and Society*, 16: 73–80.

Bonizzoni, P. 2017 "The shifting boundaries of (un)documentedness: a gendered understanding of migrants' employment-based legalization pathways in Italy", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(10): 1643–1662.

Carling, J. and F. Collins 2018 "Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6): 909–926.

Carling, J. and K. Schewel 2018 "Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6): 945–963.

Cena, E., D. Heim and R. Trandafoiu 2018 "Changing places : children of return migrants in Albania and their quest to belong", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(7): 1156–1176.

Cremers, J., C.C. Williams, J. Hawley-Woodall and N. Nikolova 2017Tackling undeclared work in the construction industry: A learning resource. European Platform Undeclared Work. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18132&langId=en (Accessed 04 June 2020)

Danaj, S. and E. Çaro 2016 "Becoming an EU citizen through Italy: the experience of Albanian immigrants", *Mondi Migranti*, 3: 95–108.

Datta, K., C. McIlwaine, J. Herbert, Y. Evans, J. May and J. Wills 2009 "Men on the move: Narratives of migration and work among low-paid migrant men in London", *Social and Cultural Geography*, 10(8): 853–873.

de Haas, H. 2010 "Migration and development: A theoretical perspective", *International Migration Review*, 44(1): 227–264.

Della Puppa, F. 2016 "Ambivalences of the emotional logics of migration and family reunification: emotions, experiences and aspirations of Bangladeshi husbands and wives in Italy", *Identities*, 25(3): 358–375.

2018 "Ambivalent mobilities and survival strategies of Moroccan and Bangladeshi families in italy in times of crisis", *Sociology*, 52(3): 464–479.

Della Puppa, F. and R. King 2019 "The new 'twice migrants': Motivations, experiences and disillusionments of Italian-Bangladeshis relocating to London", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(11): 1936–1952.

Dimitriadis, I. (2017) *Migrant construction workers' tactics to cope with unemployment during the crisis. Case study on Albanian immigrants in Milan and Athens.* Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Torino - University of Milan, Italy.

Dimitriadis, I. (2018) Asking around': Immigrants' counterstrategies to renew their residence permit in times of economic crisis in Italy. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16(3), 275–292. 10.1080/15562948.2016.1273433.

Dimitriadis, I. (2020) Working there is amazing, but life here is better": Imaginaries of onward migration destinations among Albanian migrant construction workers in Italy and Greece. in F.-K. Seiger, C. Timmerman, N. B. Salazar & J. Wets (Eds) *Migration at Work. Aspirations, Imaginaries & Structures of Mobility.* Leuven University Press: 135–151. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv16km21f.9.

Esteves, A.I.P., M.L. Cruz dos Santos Fonseca, and J. da Silva Macaísta Malheiros. 2018 "Labour market integration of immigrants in portugal in times of austerity: Resilience, in Situ responses and re-emigration", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(14): 2375–2391.

Friberg, J.H. 2012 "The Stages of Migration. From Going Abroad to Settling Down: Post-Accession Polish Migrant Workers in Norway", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(10): 1589–1605.

Gemi, E. 2014 "Transnational practices of Albanian families during the Greek crisis: unemployment, de-regularization and return", *International Review of Sociology*, 24(3): 406–421.

2016 "Integration and transnational mobility in time of crisis : The case of Albanians in Greece and Italy", *Studi Emigrazione*, LIII(202): 237–255.

Itzigsohn, J. and S. Giorguli-Saucedo 2005 "Incorporation, transnationalism, and gender: Immigrant incorporation and transnational participation as gendered processes", *International Migration Review*, 39(4): 895–920.

Karamoschou, C. 2018 "The Albanian Second Migration: Albanians Fleeing the Greek Crisis and Onward Migrating to the UK". Brighton: University of Sussex, Sussex Centre for Migration Research Working Paper No. 93.

King, R. and J. Vullnetari 2012 "A population on the move: Migration and gender relations in Albania", *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 5(2): 207–220.

Lafleur, J.-M. and M. Stanek 2017 "South-North migration of EU citizens in times of crisis", *IMISCOE Research Series Springer*.

Levitt, P. and N. Glick Schiller 2004 "Conceptualizing simultaneity: A transnational social field perspective on society", *International Migration Review*, 38(3): 1002–1039.

Mai, N. and C. Paladini 2013 "Flexible circularities: Integration, Return, and Socio-Economic Instability within Albanian Migration to Italy", in A. Triandafyllidou (Ed.), *Circular Migration Between Europe and its Neighborhood. Choice or Necessity?* Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK: 42–67.

Maroukis, T. and E. Gemi 2013) Albanian circular migration in Greece: beyond the state?. *Circular Migration Between Europe and its Neighborhood. Choice or Necessity?* in A. Triandafyllidou Oxford University Press, (Ed): 68–89.

Maroukis, T., K. Iglicka and K. Gmaj 2011 "Irregular migration and informal economy in Southern and Central- Eastern Europe: Breaking the vicious cycle?", *International Migration*, 49(5): 129–156.

Martiniello, M. and A. Rea 2014 "The concept of migratory careers: Elements for a new theoretical perspective of contemporary human mobility", *Current Sociology*, 62(7): 1079–1096.

Mas Giralt, R. 2017 "Onward migration as a coping strategy? Latin Americans moving from Spain to the UK post-2008", *Population, Space and Place*, 23: 1–12.

McIlwaine, C. 2012 "Constructing transnational social spaces among Latin American migrants in Europe: Perspectives from the UK", *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 5(2): 289–303.

McIlwaine, C. and D. Bunge 2018 "Onward Precarity, Mobility, and Migration among Latin Americans in London", *Antipode*, 51(2): 601–619.

Michail, D. 2013 "Social development and transnational households: resilience and motivation for Albanian immigrants in Greece in the era of economic crisis", *Southeast Europe and Black Sea Studies*, 13(2): 265–279.

Moret, J. 2016 "Cross-border mobility, transnationality and ethnicity as resources: European Somalis' postmigration mobility practices", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42(9): 1455–1472.

Morokvasic, M. 2004 "'Settled in Mobility': Engendering Post-Wall Migration in Europe", *Feminist Review*, 77: 7–25.

Morrison, C. and D. Sacchetto 2014 "Migrant labour between Russia and Italy: from strategic options to 'geography of needs'", in M. Pajnik and F. Anthias (Eds) *Work and the challenges of belonging: Migrants in globalizing economies*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: 28–51.

Papailias, P. 2003 "' Money of kurbetis money of blood': the making of a 'hero' of migration at the Greek-Albanian border", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 29(6): 1059–1078.

Perrotta, D. 2011 *Vite in Cantiere. Migrazione e lavoro dei rumeni in Italia. (Lives in Building Sites. Migration and work of Romanians in Italy).* Il Mulino, Bologna, Italy

Ramos, C. 2018 "Onward migration from Spain to London in times of crisis: the importance of life-course junctures in secondary migrations", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(11): 1841–1857.

2020 "Searching for stability: Onward migration and pathways of precarious incorporation in and out of Spain", *International Migration*, https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12756

Thiel, D. 2012 *Builders: Class, Gender and Ethnicity in the Construction Industry.* Routledge, London.

Vathi, Z. 2015 *Migrating and Settling in a Mobile World.* . IMISCOE Research Series, Springer. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Vullnetari, J. 2012 *Albania on the Move.* IMISCOE Research Series, Springer. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, Netherlands.