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“Working there is amazing, but life here is better”: Imaginaries of onward migration destinations among Albanian migrant construction workers in Italy and Greece

Iraklis Dimitriadis

Introduction

Research on the effects of the 2008 financial crisis on migrant population in Southern European countries has largely focused on migrants' practices to cope with unemployment and deteriorating living and working conditions. Recent evidence has shown that many immigrants stayed put in the receiving country, or re-emigrated to a new EU country (Dimitriadis, 2017; Esteves, Fonseca & Malheiros, 2017; Gemi, 2016; Mas Giralt, 2017; Ramos, 2017).

Immigrants' relocation to a new destination country has thus gained attention among scholars who often used the term “onward migration” when referring to this migration pattern (Ahrens, Kelly & Van Liempt, 2016; Della Puppa & King, 2019; Della Puppa & Sredanovic, 2017; Esteves et al., 2017; Mas Giralt, 2017; McIlwaine, 2012; Ramos, 2017). Although putting much emphasis on the motivations underlying the onward move, these studies have overshadowed the prominence of imaginaries of the new destination (Salazar, 2011). One exception is the studies of Della Puppa and colleagues (2017; 2018) with Bangladeshi onward migrants, which showed how imaginaries of life in London and the UK induced new migration. However, they did not deal with how (negative) shared representations of the preferred destination may also be linked with decisions of foregoing onward migration and how these are constructed.

Earlier research on different types of migration (labour migration, life-style migration) and tourism has revealed that culturally and socially constructed

representations inform decisions to move and settle (Appadurai, 1996; Paul, 2011; Salazar, 2011; Sayad, 2004). Individuals' orientations and motivations for migration are mediated by imaginaries of other places and people's lives, which are constructed through interaction with other migrants or people returning, and empowered by popular media (Coletto & Fullin, 2019; Dimitriadis, Fullin & Fischer-Souan, 2019). Yet little is known about imaginaries of onward migration, and how they can be associated with intentions of moving (or not) to a new destination.

In suggesting that imaginaries may orient onward migration, this chapter explores work- and life-related subjective representations that may inform desires to leave the initial destination, or decisions for staying put. Empirical evidence comes from a qualitative study on Albanian migrant construction workers who resided in Milan and Athens during the crisis. Focusing on labour migrants in Italy and Greece, the study confirms that subjective representations provide a useful tool for understanding drivers for re-emigration, and claims that the analysis of imaginaries may contribute to the debate on motivations for onward migration. This does not imply that onward migration (or not) can be driven only by imaginaries, but it is argued that socially and culturally constructed representations may inform migrants' decisions.

The chapter starts with a brief review of the existing literature on the motivations for onward migration and follows the concept of imaginaries (Salazar, 2011). Then, after providing some information on the methods and contexts of this study, it presents the analysis of the participants' narratives of onward migration and finally offers some conclusive considerations.

Literature review and concepts

Looking at recent studies conducted with onward migrants, motivations for a new move are in the centre of the analysis. These are multiple and related to migrants' experiences in the first destination, their aspirations for the future and desires (Graw & Scielke, 2012). With regard to onward migration from Southern European countries, Latin American immigrants are motivated to leave Spain due to the lack of job and career opportunities; to access a better educational system (for themselves as students, or with regard to the life-chances of their offspring); to escape discrimination and racism; to join larger co-ethnic communities (Mas Giralt, 2017; Ramos, 2017). Onward migration has been seen as a reactionary

practice also in the case of onward migrants from Portugal, in the sense that individuals opted to move to overcome economic constraints. At the same time, they were driven by aspirations for new employment opportunities, better-paid jobs, and career advancement (Esteves et al., 2017). Unlike these contributions, Della Puppa and King (2019) stated that Bangladeshis' decisions to move to London have not been conditioned by the effects of the economic crisis, but have rather been shaped by concerns over their children's academic futures, the desire to join the largest Bangladeshi diasporic community and experiences of racism in Italian society and discrimination at work. When it comes to racism, hence, onward migration may be seen as involuntarily, while the same is true in the case of onward migrants who identify with the country they leave in order to cope with economic hurdles (Mas Giralt, 2017).

Regardless of being voluntary or involuntary, few of these works shed light on the imaginaries that lie behind these motivations and desire to re-emigrate. Exceptionally, Della Puppa and colleagues (2017; 2018) argue that collective visions of life in London inform Bangladeshis' decisions to move to the UK during the crisis. In other words, their onward migration is not due to unemployment, but because they regard London (and the UK) as a place where they will not suffer discrimination and can access better employment and career opportunities, and a generous welfare system. However, in these works the authors look only at the positive social representations associated with life in the new destination and not at the negative ones that probably could provide a useful tool to explain one's decision to stay put (Salazar, 2014).

Imaginaries have been defined as "socially shared and transmitted (both within and between cultures) representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings" (Salazar, 2011, p. 576). Social actors use their imagination as a device to give meaning to their or others' acts; to form ideas about people and places. Immigration scholars have used this "meaning-making and world-shaping" device to demonstrate how (im)mobility and migration are influenced by the recounts of those who have already migrated (Appadurai, 1996; Salazar, 2011; Sayad, 2004) and how potential migrants may opt for one country or another, based on an imagined hierarchy of destination countries (Pajo, 2008; Paul, 2011). Imagination as a driving force (Salazar, 2018) for mobility and migration has been largely suggested by studies on life-style migration (Benson & Osbaldiston, 2014), labour migration (Appadurai, 1996) and tourism (Salazar, 2011), but not so much in recent research on onward migration.

Methods and contexts

The empirical material for this study consists of 61 in-depth interviews with Albanian migrant construction workers in Italy and in Greece: 29 were interviewed in Milan and 32 in Athens. All interviewees except one were settled migrants (most of them emigrated at least ten years ago) and have regular status. Fieldwork research was conducted from March 2015 to August 2016. Respondents were accessed through cultural associations, community events, trade unionists and personal contacts, and by “snowballing”. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Italian and Greek. Quotations used in the findings were translated into English. All interviews were with male migrants whose ages ranged widely, from 27 to 63 years, with the majority of them being 35- to 44-year-olds, married with two or three children. Although there are limitations emerging from a gender perspective, I remain sensitive to gender dynamics in my analysis.

Reflecting on some methodological challenges, it should be mentioned that there was a major difficulty in recruiting participants, and it is mainly due to three factors. First, it is the nature of their job, in the sense that, on the one hand, (migrant) builders often work in an informal way and may be reluctant to talk about irregular economic activities, and, on the other, they have to move across building sites which makes organising appointments with any researcher difficult. Similarly, the second challenge concerned another (transnational) spatial dimension, as many of my participants moved across countries to grasp casual working opportunities. Third, economic hardships faced by many migrant workers during the crisis could be a deterrent, as it is supposed that unemployed people would not be eager to talk about unpleasant experiences.

All respondents had contemplated onward migration regardless of their economic situation during the crisis. I collected their narratives by asking them “how did you cope with the crisis?”, “have you ever thought of moving to another country? If yes, where?”. Through naturally expressed opinions and representations of working conditions and life in Italy and Greece compared with what happens in other EU countries, imaginaries of the situation outside their current place of residence often emerged without elicitation. Although these imaginaries may inform plans for onward migration or staying put, I consider that there are also other factors explaining their decisions to relocate or not.

Contexts

Significant numbers of Albanians migrated to other countries in Europe after the collapse of Hoxha's regime in the early 1990s. Apart from a limited number of those who sought asylum for political reasons in Germany, France, or Italy, the majority of the first migrants settled and worked irregularly in Greece and Italy, taking advantage of the widespread informal economy (Reyneri, 1998; Ambrosini, 2018). Migration flows persisted due to the economic crisis in Albania in 1997 and the Kosovo war in 1998. Many citizens of the Albanian state mixed with Kosovan (Albanian) asylum seekers, and were granted asylum in various European countries. Nowadays, the biggest part of the Albanian diaspora resides in Italy and Greece (almost 75 per cent of Albanian emigrants – more than one million people). Germany and Switzerland also host a large number of Albanian immigrants (300,000 and 100,000 respectively). Although being non-EU migrants, Albanians have had the right to travel and stay within the Schengen area for up to three months since 2011. Recent research suggests that numerous Albanian migrants in Italy (Danaj & Caro, 2016) and fewer in Greece (Karamoschou, 2018) acquired Italian or Greek citizenship, and were thus able to enjoy EU citizenship rights of movement and work in the Union. For these new EU citizens, or even for long-term EU stay permit holders, onward migration has constituted a coping practice during the crisis, although Gemi (2016) claims that many Albanian migrants have not been able to stabilise their regular status due to the lack of formal contracts.

The Greek financial crisis began in 2009, and it “soon turned into a sovereign debt crisis”, opening up a long and deep recession period (Matsaganis, 2013, p. 152). After that, Greece was in recession for a number of years, and Greek construction has been the sector that suffered by far the worst crisis effects. Thousands of Albanian construction workers became unemployed during the crisis or suffered under-employment, bad working conditions and cuts in salaries and welfare provisions (Maroukis, 2013).

The recent global financial crisis had negative effects also on the Italian economy, although it did not contract it as dramatically as the Greek (Di Quirico, 2010). From 2008 to 2014, the Italian Gross Domestic Product reduced in five years out of seven. The crisis particularly touched the banking system and, in this context, the national governments opted to shield the economy by supporting Italian banks and, thus, cutting public spending. However, it has

to be highlighted that the crisis hit the Northern and Southern Italian regions disproportionately, predominantly affecting the South of Italy.

Imaginarities informing the desire for onward migration

The Greek and Italian economic and financial crisis affected the construction industry disproportionately compared to other economic sectors and, as a result, migrant workers who were concentrated in construction suffered from job losses and under-employment (Maroukis, 2013; Bonifazi & Marini, 2014). Unable to sustain their households, many respondents wanted to leave the first destination and move to another European country. In other words, onward migration constituted a coping strategy for an unexpected event (Martiniello & Rea, 2014), such as the economic recession.

However, not only is the lack of jobs in the Greek or Italian economies the driver for onward migration, but it seems that Albanian builders may opt to leave their first destination due to experiences of poor working conditions. Empirical evidence coming from interviews in both countries indicates that migrant construction workers contemplate onward migration because of dissatisfaction with their working conditions. Informants reveal that working conditions have worsened during and since the crisis. Salary cuts, unpaid overtime and de-skilling have been accentuated due to economic recession.

By contrast, research participants who develop plans for onward migration represent working conditions in other European countries as ideal. In other words, the idea that a move to a new destination can improve their working lives is associated with images of well-functioning labour markets in northern European countries. On being asked where they would like to re-emigrate, nearly all interviewees refer to Germany, and some of them also to Belgium, the UK, Sweden and Austria. These countries are represented as destinations where construction workers enjoy excellent working conditions. Most respondents tend to idealise the job situation in the construction sector in those countries, and these imaginaries generate the desire for onward migration. There their colleagues are not engaged in informal working practices, are not requested to work long hours and do not suffer stressful working conditions as happens in Italy and Greece. Some of my respondents recount:

[...] in Austria, let's say you are to work for 10 days [as a declared worker] [...] when you have to work one more day, the employers go to declare you [register with the authorities]; they are concerned about your security first of all! (Adnan, aged 40, Greece)

I am thinking of going to Germany [...] When I get there, I will work for 8-10 hours, and then go home. The work is pleasure [there] (Fatlum, aged 35, Greece)

[In Germany] it is said that if you are ok with your stay permit and you find a job, you are not stressed (Besian, aged 44, Italy)

The ubiquity of mentions of the optimum working conditions in terms of hours, occupational health and safety and the depiction of employers as sensible individuals who take care of their employees in other EU countries indicate the hurdles that Albanian builders have traditionally faced in Greece and Italy. These entail poor employment conditions and safety measures, and the prevalence of informal work (Dimitriadis, 2017; Maroukis, 2009; Perrotta, 2011; Reyneri, 1998). The absence of formal employment relations, in particular, has constantly put at risk the legal status of those with temporary stay permits (and consequently their migration experience) due to the rigid link between formal job contracts and regular status (Dimitriadis, 2018; Triandafyllidou & Ambrosini, 2011). On the other hand, imaginaries of ideal employment conditions in other European destinations may shape their aspirations to undertake onward migration.

Several interviewees also argued that they feel unprotected from unscrupulous employers in Italy and Greece who do not respect (oral or written) contractual agreements. At the same time, their rights are not sufficiently secured by institutional actors such as trade unions or work inspectorates. Describing his experiences as a builder in Italy, Enver is contemplating onward migration to Germany or Switzerland, although he was never unemployed during the crisis and had an open-ended contract with a prestigious construction firm.

There are no controls here (at building sites). They [employers] decide upon prices [salaries] as they want. There is no one to control them[...] and when they [authorities] make inspections, they do not care at all. It's a chain of bastards who take advantage of it (they are corrupted). Why don't they

control my professional card to see that I'm paid below my qualifications?
(Enver, aged 29, Italy)

Unlike in the situation in Greece and Italy, my participants often portray images of institutional actors who keep a constant watch on respect for labour rights in other EU countries. Enver, after criticising the weak position of migrant workers in the Italian construction sector, extolls the working conditions in the German construction sector, as well as the centrality of the state and its labour inspection authorities to protect labour rights. Images and discourses of efficient states that guarantee the rights of construction workers and take care of them seem to shape aspirations for onward migration. Imagined protection of migrant workers' rights also couple with imaginaries of meritocratic labour markets where workers are paid what they deserve to be. In his words:

In Germany, you receive the money you deserve through the State [by bank payment], and it monitors whether you get paid or not. [If not] the State twists the employer's ears [reprimand] and tells him 'come here, why did not you give the money to that guy [worker]? ... That guy did not receive his money, it's one day has already passed, and he has not been paid yet. What happened? You have to pay him immediately!... Every month the State controls you [construction company]! ...If you are a builder [in Germany], you start [earn] with 3,000 euros a month; the lowest [minimum wage]. In Switzerland too. [...] I have recently been to Germany and I have been told that, according to the law, [workers] are paid 18 euros per hour; it does not exist below [this amount] [beating his punch on the table], it is obligatory! Otherwise, the State can destroy you [construction company]. First, they [employers] are given a fine of 100 thousand euros, and second [they go to] the jail. The municipality calls you and asks: 'Enver, is there any problem?' This is the State! This is democracy! (Enver, aged 29, Italy)

Although imaginaries can be seen as forces that trigger onward migration (Della Puppa & King, 2019), the narratives of my participants may also be considered a way to justify their difficulty in continuing to be the main breadwinners as happened before the crisis (Dimitriadis, 2017). Recurrent references to the importance of finding a job in European construction where competent workers can earn good money may be seen as a way to heal their wounded masculinities (Van Boeschoten, 2015). In addition, as Albanian migration has traditionally

been a male pattern, onward migration may be represented as such in order to confirm males' prominent role in the household economy.

Collective or individual representations of efficient labour markets may also attract those who aspire to advance their careers. Self-employed workers and entrepreneurs of my sample often complained about the troubles that they had to face as construction firm owners. Difficulties in accessing credit, high taxation, late payments and complex bureaucratic procedures were common when describing the "problematic Italian and Greek economies". At the same time, many respondents considered that labour market regulation in the new destination would permit them to improve their careers in the construction sector. Fatlum narrates:

In Greece, there is problem with the payments... if I go to Germany, everything is simpler. I know some people who work there and said me that I could make big money as sub-contractor! (Fatum, aged 35, Greece)

Although the favourite destination of potential onward migration of Albanians both in Greece and Italy was Germany, it was not uncommon that Albanians in Greece also regarded Italy as a place where construction migrant workers are protected and enjoy welfare benefits. This confirms Pajo's (2008, p. 10) argument about migrants' imaginary world of hierarchy. In his work, the author suggests that potential migrants perceive some countries as being higher in the global hierarchy, since they "territorialize different degrees of fulfillment and of morality and allow for different degrees of individual achievement". The following quotation is a typical expression of this idea.

My brother is in Italy. It is difficult to find a job, but as long as you get it, you become permanent (worker). You'll have your health insurance, you'll have everything! (Armend, aged 43, Greece)

Imaginations of ideal labour markets have been gleaned from their family members or friends by word of mouth. Fellow countrymen and family share narratives of how the construction sector operates abroad, and these become social representations that may trigger onward migration. It is worth adding here that representations are spread not just by word of mouth, but onward migration may be also subject to images circulating through social media and smartphones. The following quotation shows how imaginaries come about:

I am always talking via Skype or Viber [VoIP/IM software application] with my brother-in-law who lives in Switzerland. He works for a company and sends me photos. They [workers] have a kitchen to go to eat [at the workplace]! Here, it does not exist. Not even at the best company in Greece exists! Forget it! (Avni, aged 34, Athens)

Although imaginaries created by word of mouth or single images may inform onward migration plans, they are able also to deter immigrants from relocation. In the next section I argue that imaginaries may also shape one's decision to stay put.

Imaginaries of onward migration that shape decisions to stay put

Apart from certain structural factors that constrain onward migration (e.g. the lack of means or legal status to move onward and work in another EU country, material investments in the first destination), some respondents who would be able and aspire to onward-migrate decided not to do so. Delving into my participants' narratives, it can be argued that imaginaries of life abroad may inform decisions for non-migration.

In immigration studies, non-migration (defined also as immobility: Carling, 2002) refers to both those who voluntarily prefer to stay put and not migrate and those who lack the ability to do so. Rather than being involuntary (Babar, Ewers & Khattab, 2018), I argue here that non-re-emigration of low-skilled migrant workers may be voluntary and shaped by social imaginaries, and thus not be associated with incapacity to relocate. Hence, imaginaries of places may both orient onward migrants (Della Puppa & Sredanovic, 2017; Della Puppa & King, 2019) and discourage settled migrants from onward-migrating.

On the face of it, many respondents imagine life in other destinations as being arduous and monotonous. Although Northern European countries were represented as contexts in which there are more economic opportunities and workers are better off, onward movement entails change in the way of living which may inform Albanian migrants' decisions to onward-migrate. During our interview, Edward describes what relocation to Germany implies. Even if he became unemployed many times during the crisis and had to do other jobs to get by, he cannot imagine himself being satisfied with his life in Germany; something very different from what he has in Greece:

I was thinking of it (migrate to a new destination), but there's nowhere like Greece! One cousin of mine who lives in Germany tells me that [in Germany] you cannot live the life you live in Greece. You can't! Here we work eight hours, from 7 am to 3 pm. Then, you can go home, you have lunch, you ride the car and you reach the beach in half an hour. You lie on the beach and have bath until 8 pm. Then, you can go out at any time [...] it does make the difference. (Edward, aged 32, Greece)

The quest for a “good life” and cultural consumption of this sort are often drivers for migration for so-called “lifestyle migrants” (Griffiths & Maile, 2014). In their work on Britons who live in Berlin, these authors suggest that such imaginaries inform the migration plans of well-off individuals. Here, it can be argued that negative images of quality-of-life aspects in Northern European countries may shape non-migration. This finding was more recurrent among my respondents in Athens. Images of uncomfortable work schedules and narrowing social life outside Greece that circulate among migrants seem to be a deterrent to onward migration. The difference between respondents in Athens and those in Milan might be due to the characteristics of Milan as a global city (Andreotti, 2006; 2019) in which life would be more similar to that in other European capitals or big cities.

Imaginaries of a better social life and leisure interests in a new destination also concern Albanian migrants' children. In their narratives, my participants recounted that life in Greece and Italy is “better” for their children than it would be in other EU countries. For those with families, onward migration is often seen as an obstacle to their children's well-being, not only due to a series of objective difficulties that they could face (e.g. learning a new language, adaptation in a new context), but also from a lifestyle point of view. In particular, some of my respondents represent new EU destinations as places where their children would suffer; the saying that children “grow up in a better way” in Greece and Italy was often repeated:

If there is the opportunity in the future, maybe I'll do it alone, in the sense that I will go there for some years and I will return to Athens. I don't think about staying permanently there. I will save money and I will buy a house here [Athens]. The children and my wife will stay here. The life is better here also for them. (Gjin, aged 34, Greece)

This finding is in contrast with what has been claimed about onward migrants who leave their first destination to offer better future opportunities for their children; in places that are higher “in the global hierarchical order” (Pajo, 2008, p. 10). Looking at recent research on onward migrants who move from Italy to the UK, Bangladeshis represent London as “the global, multicultural, cosmopolitan city” where there are plenty of “opportunities which allows people from every country in the world to enhance their capabilities and potential” (Della Puppa & King, 2019, p. 1943). Motives concerning children’s future are claimed in my case-studies as well, but these are of a different nature. Such differences might be due to a sense of cultural proximity between Albanians and Greeks or Italians or identification with the country of destination they live in (Karamoschou, 2018; Mas Giralt, 2018), a discussion that goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

As argued before, onward migration is represented as a male pattern. In my participants’ narratives, plans for onward migration lack references about women’s role in the new destination. Rather, women’s contribution might be only bringing up children, even though during the crisis Albanian women’s employment has been the key to coping with unemployment and poverty (Gemi, 2016; Dimitriadis, 2017).

Last but not least, for my participants a new movement implies new experiences of racism. Imaginaries of eventual experiences of discrimination in the new destinations were widespread among participants. They imagine that they will feel discriminated against as new migrants in the second destination. They do not want to feel “migrants” again as they said:

Don’t think that there is no racism in Germany or in Sweden. [Once we arrive] there, we will be once again migrants! (Valon, aged 44, Greece)

It is well documented that Albanian immigration into Greece and Italy has been accompanied by discrimination and stigmatisation, mainly during the first two decades of their migration experience (King & Mai, 2009; Kokkali, 2011). In both countries, media and public discourse have reproduced stereotypes of Albanians as criminals and uncivilised. Nowadays, although their economic integration has been severely challenged by the recent crisis, their socio-cultural integration is considered quite successful in Italy and Greece (Gemi, 2016). Hence, imaginaries of a problematic integration in the new receiving society, including expected hostility in various European countries against newly arrived migrants due to the recent so-called “refugee crisis”, can deter them from deciding on onward

migration. The same can also be true for migrants' children, in the sense that the parents imagine that their children may experience discrimination, and that that would be undesirable.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the imaginaries of re-migration among Albanian migrant construction workers in Italy and Greece, thus contributing to an emergent literature on onward migration. It confirmed what has been argued about the role of socially constructed representations that may inform motives for relocation (Della Puppa & Sredanovic, 2017; Della Puppa & King, 2019), shedding light on motivations for onward migration. Delving into potential onward migrants' narrative though, it adds that imaginaries might also be at the roots of non-migration, suggesting an interrelationship between imaginaries and non-migration too, that is rarely investigated in studies about onward migrants. Although it is not suggested that imaginaries are in themselves sufficient to explain onward migration or non-migration, it underlines their importance in comprehending how they may inform migrants' decision-making, highlighting the dialectical nature of imaginaries and structures.

On the one hand, positive imaginaries of onward migration are associated with migration experiences, and in particular with the difficulties that Albanian migrants have traditionally faced in the Italian and Greek labour markets. These have been accentuated during the crisis period and include low payments, unpaid labour, informal work, and generally trampling on labour rights and a lack of protection by state authorities. Hence, migrants tend to idealise work environments in other EU countries where they would like to onward-migrate, and imaginaries reveal the desire to improve their employment (and economic) situation.

On the other hand, imaginaries may inform decisions for non-relocation, which means staying put in the first destination. Here it has been argued that onward migration cannot be driven only by the possibility of improving one's economic situation. Rather, more immaterial considerations seem to inform migrants, such as imaginaries of narrowing life in the new country of destination. Thus, it is shown that lifestyle considerations concern not only high-skilled and well-off migrants (Babar et al., 2018) but also low-skilled ones. In addition, new imagined experiences of racism against them and their children may inform their decision

not to onward-migrate in order to maintain what they enjoy in the current destination country, even if it may entail their demoting better opportunities in the new destination for them and their offspring to second place.

Drawing on both literature on lifestyle migration and lived experiences among low-skilled migrant workers, another contribution concerns the idea of a hierarchy between countries at a global scale. Instead of economic prosperity and favourable conditions for individual achievement being the criteria assessing imagined ranking, the chapter shows the importance of social, cultural and geographical elements in appraising a country in which to migrate or live.

Looking at both positive and negative social representations of the new destination, it can be argued that the boundaries between voluntary and involuntary migration should be considered rather blurred. The desires for either onward-migration or staying put are intertwined, and motivations for engaging in or foregoing re-migration may be contradicting. This shows the complexity of the decision-making process for relocation, and that imaginaries may serve as needed devices to justify one's choice whether or not to relocate.

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