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Mobility intentions of Latvian high-school graduates amid Covid-19 pandemic and beyond¹

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, time had become legato, if not stationary for many. This included secondary school students who were about to finish high school and transition to a new phase in their life, be that work, higher education or other activities. Many feared they are missing out or lost opportunities. In this paper, we explore how Latvian secondary school graduates perceive their mobility opportunities and intentions using survey data gathered during years 2019, 2020 and 2021, i.e., the year before Covid-19 and during two years of pandemic. This will provide insight into Generation Z students' plans for the future as well as how they adopt to a world that is freer of restrictions but not what it used to be.

This paper aims to shed light on trajectories of graduates after they exit the high-school door. We present evidence on mobility plans of youngsters and allow quantitative estimation of loss of human capital towards Western European countries.

Keywords: school graduates, youth mobility, Generation Z, migration intentions, Covid-19, Latvia

Introduction

Latvia, a European country with a population of 2 million people in the north-east of Europe, has seen one of the greatest rates of population loss in recent history, with a population of 19 percent smaller in 2020 than in 2000 (UN Population Division Database, ND). This is due in part to the

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population's ageing and in part to emigration. Young people leave Latvia for a variety of reasons, but most importantly for studying and working overseas. Two and a half thousand people aged 15-24 leave Latvia every year (Oficiālais statistikas portāls, ND), more than one percent of the total population in this age group, and close to twenty percent of all emigrants. Hence, this constitutes an important moment of brain drain with potential long-term consequences for productivity, country's human capital, innovation and demographic development in general.

Migration is a selective phenomenon characteristic specifically to young ages. The youth group of 15-29 years is especially mobile – in Europe it was the most mobile part of population group of all people in years 2013–2017, with peak between 25-29 years. Although young generation, now Generation Z, people constitute majority of all migration flows, relatively little is known about their mobility intentions and aspirations, especially the gap is evident in literature on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Further, the Covid-19 pandemic that hit globally in early 2020 brought about new circumstances with regards to international mobility and studies abroad.

Migration intentions develop throughout adolescence (Lulle and Jurkane-Hobein, 2017). The graduation from secondary school is a focal moment in one's life when the young person is to decide what to study and where to live. In this research we focus on mobility intentions of young people at the moment when they exit the school door and set off to independent life. We assess their plans and aspirations to study abroad and live abroad. We also explore the role the pandemic has potentially played in the decisions. There are indeed two separate questions that we address: What are the study mobility intentions of the Latvian adolescents and the reasoning behind? And what are the lifetime mobility aspirations?

The focus of this study is on the moment of transition from school to life: secondary education to higher education; never worked to employment, and, more generally, 'childhood' to 'adulthood', which all happens for this cohort, Generation Z, during the Covid-19 global pandemic. We explore how the young people's international mobility intentions are formed at this complicated moment.

2 Background

2.1 Definitions, life cycle and youth mobility

The first distinction is to be made between migration or mobility. Migration is moving from one place to another followed by staying in the destination for a certain period. Mobility however is understood as a more dynamic movement without the ‘set’ time and can involve moving back and forth between places (countries) or transitioning further to new locations. Concerning youth, at the age of 19, it is arguable how well an adolescent can project the moves beyond one year, if even that far ahead, so indeed we are speaking about both terms here without being able to distinguish between them. Also more generally in Europe, researchers notice a convergence of the two terms, linked with transnationalism and the fluid nature of migration.

King, Lulle, Moroşanu, & Williams (2016) note a shift in terminology by EU, IOM and UNDP. They report that the institutions tend to replace the term ‘migration’ with the more elastic ‘mobility’. ‘Migration’ implies that migrants will stay for some time, perhaps for good, while ‘mobility’ signals that people will not stay but move on, either back to their home country or onwards to another one.

More and more commonly, migratory movements are not permanent, hence gaining the name “liquid migration”. Such things as multiple identities, regular commuting across borders, living on regular basis or shifting between different societies have become more widespread (Cairns, 2021; Fassmann, Gruber, & Nemeth, 2018; King et al., 2016). This system has become known as transnationalism, also known as circular migration which is particularly true in younger ages.

To be precise, we should also define the concept of “youth” since it can differ from culture to culture. UN and EC define youth as population aged 15-24. OECD uses the same age group, while occasionally expanding the age limit up to 34. In other studies, for example, King et al. (2016) it is the age 18-34. In this study we concentrate the moment around high-school graduation which in Latvia takes place the year when individual achieves the age of 19, sometimes 18, which defines our age brackets for youth/adolescents.

Migration is a selective process as not all population subgroups have equal mobility prevalence. Age is the prime determinant of likelihood of mobility. From a human life cycle perspective, migration is closely linked to important events in the life of every individual. In the early stages of life the moves are tied with parents or caregivers and individuals have little if any choice in making mobility decisions, however reaching age of adolescence and maturity (that can be at different ages in different countries), the individuals start to make moves that are associated with changes in own lifecycle. Most pivotal life course events triggering migration typically happen in young ages (18-34) hence majority of migrants are young. This period typically also covers the transition from school to higher education institution, from studying to employment and from living with caregivers to living independently. Also according to Fassman et al (2018), the age-specific distribution of migrants rises sharply after age 18 when secondary education is completed which in most of the European countries is between 16 and 20 years of age, and peaks between 23 and 25 years when tertiary education is started or when entering the labour market. In this study we are concerned with the very early stage of the independent migration, and looking to assess migration intentions as the best predictor for the actual behaviour. Even though youth is the most mobile population group there are still gaps regarding the factors that drive actual and intended generation Z migration.

2.2. Theoretical perspectives relevant to youth migration

The usual framework in migration research is the ‘push and pull’ model by Lee (1966) that establishes two sets of factors driving the individual migration at micro level: the push factors – all circumstances that the individual dislikes or is not satisfied in the country/place of origin, and pull factors – the more attractive circumstances in the other locations where the individual is attracted to. This theoretical basis remains valid nowadays and for youth migration likewise. It is a simple and still very accurate theoretical basis to build upon. The model has been revisited and updated, and one of the revisions in the ‘push-pull plus’ model by Van Hear (2018) – stating the relationship between determinants of migration that are embedded in “economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental context, and more immediate factors”. The author suggests

that it is helpful to differentiate between four different sets of factors: predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating.

Fluid and fragmented migration trajectory is a characteristic of youth migration across countries. Instead of moving strictly from one place to another and staying there, young people flow and move depending on circumstances, which means that mobility alters with 'set' periods. As Cairns (2021) put it: "Young people's migration is characterized by temporality, flexibility, fluidity and open-endedness, and perhaps a sense of placelessness and social disembeddedness". Further, for youngsters the cost of migration is also generally low, meaning that returns to investment in education or a career abroad is potentially high (Gruber & Schorn, 2019).

Youth choices can also be grounded in an extra-economic logic (Skrbis, Woodward, & Bean, 2014, Krzaklewska, 2019). Instead, the driver is the wish to become part of global world and happening, desire to acquire cosmopolitan dispositions, or to follow lifestyles that revolve around international life and fun. "The increasing mobility of young people is not only due to life course transitions but is also linked to the fact that young people are growing up in an increasingly mobile world", Veale and Dona (2014) write. For globally oriented youngsters the very experience of spending time abroad is an important step in transition to adulthood (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). This increasingly mobile world is not encountered explicitly in push, pull or individual factors, however it does not contradict the economic sources of migration either.

Youth mobility acts as an 'eye-opener' (Cairns, 2021) for "new experiences, broadening awareness of a wide range of future possibilities, with the value of the experience emerging not immediately but rather many years later". The migration of young people also comes along with the process of individualization, that manifests as self-realisation, life-style choices and a "thirst for adventure" (Gruber & Schorn, 2019). And finally, mobility and foreign experience is sometimes perceived as asset that one can capitalise on later in the labour market.

In recent years an increasing number of studies has addressed migration intentions and their determinants rather than actual migration (for example, see, Varpina, Fredheim and Krumina, 2021; Migali and Scipioni, 2019; Williams et al, 2018; Esipova et al, 2016). Intentions

may not result in a real move, but they are both related to the same determinants. Because of that, migration intentions can be a good predictor for future moves. Especially regarding youth, it is beneficial to study mobility aspirations while the cohort is still reachable in the country as post-migration it is more complicated to reach the emigrants and virtually impossible to approach them as a cohort. As a result, the subjective reasoning and incentives are not known. As noted by Varpina et al. (2021), if the sending country is willing to retain the population, as is the case for Latvia, it is usually too late to act when the population has left the country. “From a policy perspective, exploring the migration incentives of those still residing in country of origin is just as important as investigating migration motives of people who already moved,” the authors note.

Intentions help to predict future behaviour. Adolescent plans may well be unstable and change quickly, but even then, the sentiment with respect to living abroad is a useful indicator of what might be expected. Further, investigating the population before mobility helps to avoid self-selection bias that is known to be present in all migrant data, and as a result quantitative estimates are more reliable and valid.

Migration intentions in Latvia have been studied before. As part of cross country and comparative research we can mention Williams et al (2018) who analysed Eurobarometer data with respect to migration plans in selected European countries, incl. Latvia. Authors report that the main factors that positively contribute to willingness to live abroad are prior foreign experience, stagnating economy and employment in simple manual work. Another study based on Eurobarometer data (Van Mol, 2016) showed that for Latvia and other CEE countries perceived alienation and other subjective factors are key determinants of high intentions for migration in the future. Low life satisfaction was found proved to be a determinant of emigration plans by Otrachshenko and Popova (2014). Also social networks and more generally migration culture are positively linked to migration intentions as showed by Docquier et al (2014) in a cross-sectional study in 138 countries based on Gallup survey data.

Migration research in Latvia is well developed, but mostly covers actual migration. For example, see a recent collection of articles in the book by Kasa and Mierina (eds, 2019).

However, less is known about migration intentions and specifically with respect to young Generation Z.

The research on Covid-19 as a factor in mobility or migration decisions has not yet been fully established. The first immediate effects such as halting travel and other mobility were there as the first response to pandemic, that have been lifted and reintroduced in response to virus infection rates. The more far-reaching implications are yet to be seen. There are suggestions Covid-19 has acted as a catalysator for mobility decisions, at the same time many flows have stopped for good. How the situation plays out on young generation mobilities is yet to be seen.

3 Methodology

This research uses survey approach to answer the research question and explore migration intentions of Latvian adolescents amid Covid-19 pandemic. Three rounds of secondary school graduates survey were run online during spring periods 2019-2021.

In line with Varpina, Fredheim and Krumina (2021) analysis that originates from the same research project, we use two different indicators for intended migration: first, we record the intended country of further studies for the adolescents that plan to start higher education in the year of observation. If the respondent plans to go abroad, we also record the country of destination. Further, we inquire if graduates would like to live abroad for “some period of their life” with answer options ‘Definitely yes’, ‘Probably yes’, ‘Might or might not’, ‘Probably not’ and ‘Definitely not’. The question does not specify a timeframe, because we believe that 18-19 year old persons are unlikely to be able to answer in a precise time window. For us it was more important to understand the feelings and thoughts with respect to life abroad. The indistinct time frame approach has been utilised in literature elsewhere (see, for example, Van Dalen and Henkens, 2012; Cairns, 2014)

The survey was run online in Latvian secondary schools, targeting final year students, soon to be graduates in 2019, 2020 and 2021, one or two months before graduation. We picked the last moment when all the cohort is still in school and not busy with final exams. This approach also made it possible to use the digital platform ‘e-klase’ used by every

We consider the achieved sample to be representative of the country in general, as well as of all regions, urban and rural, variety of school sizes, language of instruction (Latvian or Russian), as well as quality of schools (gymnasiums and regular secondary schools). The total sample for analysis was 1972 responses with the following distribution among years: 2019 – 406 respondents, 2020 – 1074 respondents, 2021 – 492 respondents. We apply descriptive statistics analysis methods. For illustrations we also use Sankey diagrams.

4 Results

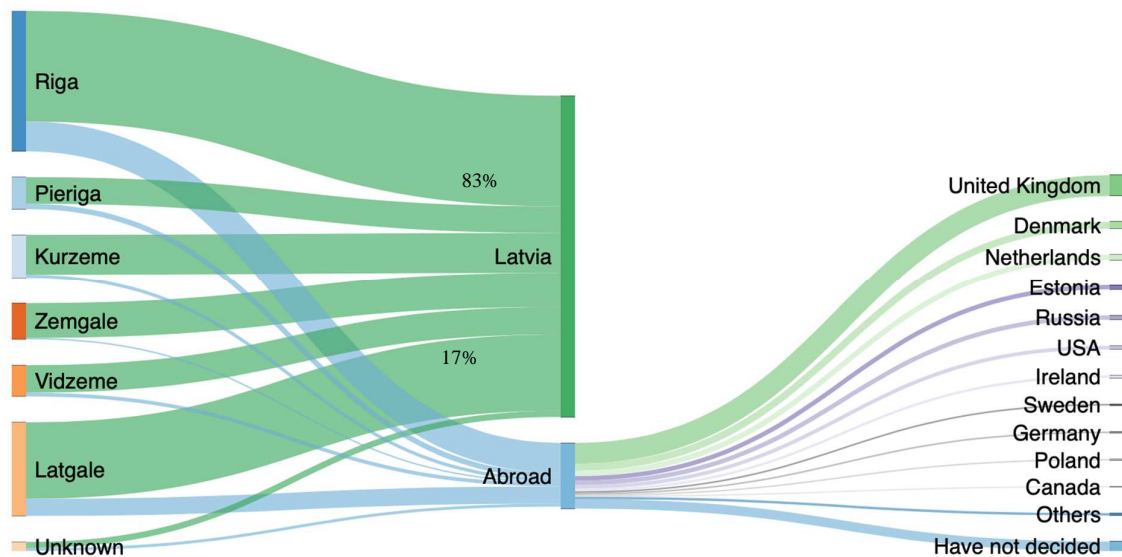
4.1 Intentions to study abroad

A large majority of school leavers in Latvia intend to carry on with education in the year following graduation from secondary education – 84% of individuals across the three years of observation said they will study. Further, a large share – 44% - intended to become employed. In Latvia work in parallel to studies in higher education is a widespread habit, which is seen also in our sample that 47% of the graduates contemplate both working and studying. Apart from the undecided 13%, there is a small proportion of graduates that would choose alternative paths – a gap year, use the year to travel and see the world, try out different things, but also establish or develop own business or do professional sports. The after-school careers seem appear rigid and see little variation. However, as expressed by youth mobility experts (Latvijas Radio, 2021), it is becoming more common than in the previous decade to take a break after secondary school and do voluntary work abroad instead of rushing into higher education.

Based on the work by Varpina, Fredheim and Krumina (2022) that uses the same database as the current work, it is known that Covid-19 has influenced the future plans of adolescents. The authors report that graduates, due to uncertainty, had somewhat different effects on their intended plans for the year after graduation. While 44% say they are less likely to live abroad, 11% express the contrary – that they are more likely to leave. Same is true for alternative plans – studying is less affected for the majority however there are similar shares of adolescents (14 and 16%) for whom the plans have been positively or negatively affected. Also, for business and entering labour market – effects diverge.

Concerning one of the primary interests of this paper – graduate intentions to acquire higher education abroad, we notice that for the pooled sample as much as 83 percent of secondary school leavers who intend to continue studies in the year of observation, would remain in Latvia, but the other 17% consider studying abroad (Figure 1). Relative to other European countries the proportion of abroad studies is low, however in Latvian context where wider access to studies abroad only opened after approximately 2010, the one fifth of internationally driven students is notable. For students from Latvia, United Kingdom (even after Brexit) is the main target country, and it is followed by Denmark and the Netherlands, as well as Estonia, Russia, USA, Ireland and Sweden. We do not attribute precise shares to the countries as the number of observations in each cell is too small to be able to draw certain conclusions, however the top destinations are the ones mentioned in media and available from qualitative studies.

Figure 1. Study plans, % of individuals planning to study



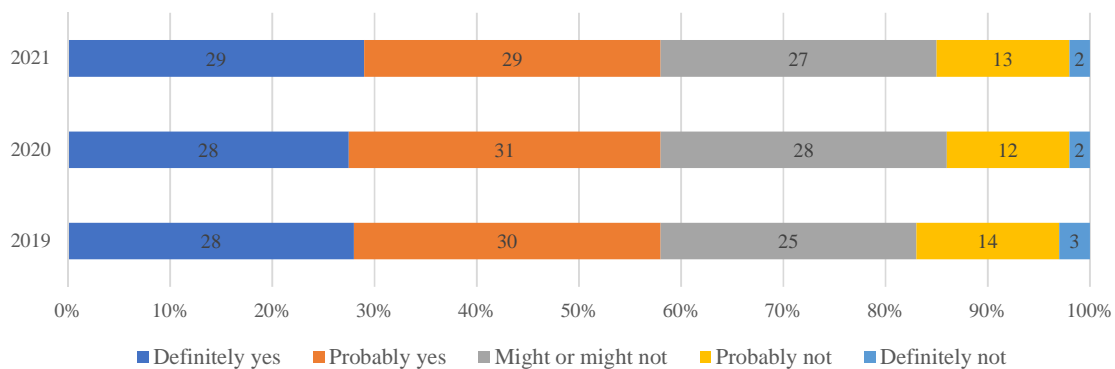
Source: authors calculations based on Graduate survey 2019-2021.

Further, there are regional differences with respect to international studies intentions. The students from metropolitan Riga are more abroad oriented as indicated by the share of graduates with foreign studies ambitions.

4.2 Migration intentions

Regarding overall migration aspirations, the data show that almost two thirds (59% across three years) of school leavers think positive regarding living in another country some time in the future. (see Figure 2). Half of these positively minded adolescents (29%) would definitely go and live for some time period, and the other half (30% of all population) were less sure, but still positive. There are just 15% of adolescents in Latvian population of 19 year-olds that are definitely (2%) or probably (13%) negative. Thirty percent of adolescents had not decided when asked.

Figure 2. Answers to question “Do you plan to live abroad for some period in the future?”



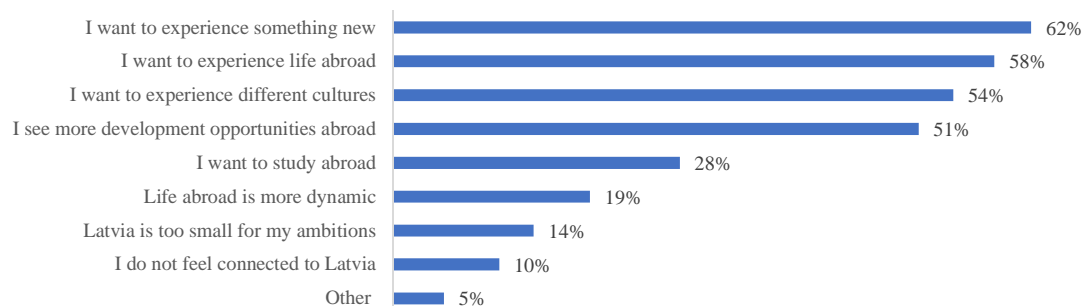
Source: authors calculations based on Graduate survey 2019-2021.

Perhaps the most surprising finding is the robustness of answers over the three years. To remind, in spring of 2020 the first wave of Covid-19 started, the uncertainty of which could have affected the responses. Schools were closed and moved to remote mode along with most of economy that was under tough restrictions. The spring of 2021 in Latvia also featured strict limitations, while people had got used to them. Still, we see that Covid-19 did not seem to affect youngsters' desires and plans to live abroad in the future.

Graduates' stated reasons behind willingness to live abroad reveal what we have seen developing in the literature regarding youth migration elsewhere – the adolescents in Latvia are looking for the global experience (Figure 3). Among their motivations dominate the non-economic reasoning – such as new experiences and different cultures. The graduates realise that

the globalised world might give them more opportunities as compared to the small home country, too small for one’s ambitions and lacking dynamics that is intrinsic to large scale economies and global metropolises.

Figure 3. Answers to question “Why do you want to live abroad?” (reasons) (% , multiple responses possible)



Source: authors calculations based on Graduate survey 2019-2021.

Quite alarmingly a tenth of youngsters do not feel connected to Latvia, and Varpina et al (2021) explain that majority of these individuals are for non-Latvian ethnicity. Only when we turn to ‘other’ reasons, the factor of better pay comes up. Still other reasons mentioned by several individual graduates include better climate in other countries, Latvian depressive society, LGBT+ rights and safety.

5 Conclusions

We intended look into secondary school graduates’ mobility aspirations during the time of global pandemic. More specifically, we asked what the study mobility intentions are and what are the life mobility aspirations of adolescents in Latvia.

Regarding the studies, we learn that nine in ten graduates plan to continue studies in higher education in the year following secondary school, and as high as 17 percent would apply for studies abroad. The 83 percent (expected) transition rate to higher education is seen as very high in comparison to other countries and is attributable to three factors. First, higher education

in Latvia is often compatible with part time or even full-time studies, and this is what many graduates suggest they will do. Second, the legacy of soviet and post-soviet education career where the so-called gap years were not common. The principle would be either continue into higher levels of education without a pause or start work career. Third, Covid-19 had broken some of the plans; and during higher uncertainty about future education appears to be a value to hold on to. For those graduates who aspired for studies abroad education in European countries is most attractive, especially UK – for the well-established reputation of schools, and Netherlands and Denmark that offer high quality tuition free education.

Concerning life mobility aspirations, two thirds of adolescents, across years, express their wish to live abroad in the future, from the other side, only one in six adolescents had no interest or strictly rejected possibility to live abroad in the future. The reasons for living aboard are grounded almost exclusively in non-economic factors such as lifestyle, globalisation, wish to learn new cultures and experiences, gain independence and ‘find himself’. Yet, we also observe the reasoning that Latvia is too small to achieve the life objectives and having better opportunities abroad.

The drive to experience life abroad in the form of studies or unconnected to education for Latvian adolescents is very high. Covid-19 has not affected the general perceptions and overall plans, if only shifted priorities in short term. This phenomenon has important implications for the national higher education system. Local universities struggle to compete for enrolment with foreign ones even if the quality of education and offered opportunities are on par or better. It is impossible to limit youth emigration if such was the aim to prevent depopulation and brain-drain. Instead, the decision makers should shift attention to attracting the people after they have gained their share of global world. For that more attention should be paid to what a returnee would find back home – how open and flexible are the labour markets, how is the state of security, corruption, civil society, how much of social services are available – just to mention a few. Higher education institutions in Latvia would appear more attractive to the incoming Generation Z if they offered more and emphasized the international cooperation opportunities, such as exchange semesters, and welcomed more international students and faculty.

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