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Cross-border Commuting Changes the Way Work is Done: A Case Study of Estonian Blue-Collar and Skilled Workers in Finland

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade the number of people in Estonia who are internationally commuting weekly or monthly between Estonia and Finland has grown. The demand for extra labor in the neighboring country, the economic crisis in Estonia, and the negative wage gap and better working conditions in Finland are the main reasons why people are choosing this untraditional way of life. In my article I will discuss how transnational working pattern changes economic behaviours in men who are working in Finland, but still living in Estonia.

My research questions within this article are: 1) How do men working in another country see their situation? and 2) How have their working patterns changed compared with the time they were working and living in Estonia? Based on my year-long fieldwork, I assert that cross-border commuting has influenced the normalisation of working abroad. I also discuss the skills and professional competence needed as preconditions for cross-border mobility, while at the same time emphasising that the most important factors are the workers' flexibility to do whichever job is available necessary and their openness towards being mobile.

International long interval commuting is easier than ever before due to political, economic, and social reasons. The free movement of labour among European Union member states, the availability of cheap flights and other accessible travelling possibilities, and widespread internet and online communication platforms have created the opportunity to be internationally mobile without losing contact with the home country and close ones. Cross-border commuting creates a transnational sphere wherein people share their time among one or many countries; mobility is not an exception nor privilege, but an opportunity available to people from different social backgrounds and with different skills (Portes 2000, 256). In an era where people are more and more involved with working abroad, we need to understand the mobile way of living, how the people understand and think about it, and the main problems and future perspectives of this way of life.

According to sociologist Alejandro Portes, blue-collar and skilled labour mobility, especially cross-border commuting, can be considered transnationality from below. He states that what 'common people have done in response to the process of globalization is to create communities that sit astride political borders and that, in a very real sense, are "neither here nor there" but in both places simultaneously' (Portes 2000, 256). The person who is constantly travelling between their home and work country does not place that much emphasis on the importance of borders (Basch et al. 2000, 7) and perceives the possibilities of not only working in one foreign country, but also anywhere else around Europe (Telve 2015). Commuting between European countries is accessible not only due to the EU free

labour movement regulations, but also, especially in case of some neighbouring countries, the existence or potential rise of the transnational sphere is also supported by the cultural, linguistic, and geographical closeness.

With my article I would like to examine the case study of Estonian men working in Finland and address how we can explain cross-border commuting, what the specifics of this kind of mobility are, and how we should understand it in the transnational context. Even though the focus of my work is on Estonia and Finland, I believe the results can applied widely for Baltic-Nordic and maybe even other cases of cross-border commuting situations. My research questions within this article[1] are: 1) How do men working in another country see their situation? and 2) How have the working patterns changed compared with the time they were working and living in Estonia. To do this, I describe and analyse the patterns found among the behaviours and decisions of my target group, male cross-border long interval commuters. My main argument is that commuting changes the work patterns within social groups of commuters and it may even have an impact on societies where the commuting way of life is common. Based on my year-long fieldwork, I assert that cross-border commuting has become something very common in some rural areas of Estonia, which has influenced the normalisation of working abroad. I also discuss the skills and professional competence as preconditions for successful cross-border mobility

The meaning of cross-border commuting in the transnational sphere

Cross-border commuting between Estonia and Finland has gained quite a lot attention from the perspective of statistical analyses and quantitative research in the context of migration (Krusell 2013; Tarum 2014) and political studies (Kalev, Jakobson & Ruutsoo 2012). At the same time, qualitative approaches that would give a voice to the individuals working in this situation are not that widespread, especially from the point of view blue-collar men. Additionally, cross-border commuting in the case of Estonia and Finland is due to the historical mobility patterns, cultural connections, and cultural similarities a supplementary example of transnationalism. We can therefore analyse the role of close cultural practises is in their mobile lifestyles.

Active cross-border commuting between Estonia and Finland dates back to the 1990s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, people found new opportunities to work outside of Estonia. In some sense, the neighbouring country of Finland was the easiest choice. The country was manageable to reach and had significantly higher wages and standards of living than Estonia. Additionally, the languages of the countries are similar and native speakers of one find it easy to learn the other. Also, Estonia and Finland share many cultural similarities, such as sauna culture, midsummer celebrations, winter traditions, and even social habits, for example eye contact and personal distance norms. Additionally, television from Finland reached as far as the northern part of Estonia over decades, which brought language skills and created a mutual cultural sphere. Looking back now, the 1990s were only a starting point of the flow of commuting workers from Estonia to Finland. Moving between two neighbouring countries became quite accessible after Estonia joined the European Union in 2004 and free labour movement was declared. Cross-border movement became more intense than ever before, but still did not reach its peak. In 2008, when the global economic crises started, the unemployment rate of Estonia was at an all-time high: people lost their homes, cars, and other property to banks. During the approximately five-year period of the crisis, the construction sector was one of the most devastated ones. Many blue-collar and skilled labour workers found a solution to their unemployment in mobility. They chose a new lifestyle in which their work and home would be situated in different countries and cross-border commuting became part of their weekly or monthly movement. The active cross-border commuters group was and still is a marker of the economic crisis beginning in the 2008 in Estonia, and over the years, this group has gained recognition and acceptance on both sides of the Gulf of Finland.

In most of the cases, the commuting way of life is chosen by men. According to Estonia's last census, in 2011, there are more than 15,000 commuters between Estonia and Finland, 12,000 of whom are men (Tarum 2014, 4). The average age of commuters is 30–45 years (Krusell 2015), based on which it can be predicted that most of them are in a relationship or married and have one or more children (Telve 2015). The majority of cross-border Estonian workers are employed in blue-collar and skilled labour jobs, with employment in the construction sector prevailing. Influenced by the Estonian census data, I distinguish between 'blue-collar labour', which is unskilled manual labour, and 'skilled labour', which refers to jobs that need special qualifications such as vocational education and are different from the jobs held by highly educated professionals working in the education, health, and entrepreneurship spheres (Kruusell 2013, 133–134). Due to the fact that male blue-collar and skilled labourers form the majority of commuters between Estonia and Finland, and their living and working conditions differ from other groups, in this article I am concentrating on their experiences.

The word 'commute' means to 'travel some distance regularly between one's home and one's place of work' (The Free Dictionary 2015). Traditionally the word has been used to describe travelling between rural areas and the city. Nowadays the advanced transport system, affordable ticket prices, and free labour movement have created a situation where the commuting area can be wider than ever (Appadurai 1996, 48–65) and long interval cross-border has become more active than ever before. In the Estonia-Finland case, the physical distance between the two countries is 85 kilometres and the travelling distance is actually much shorter compared to the commuting routes inside one country, for example in the case of Germany or France. At the same time people are still travelling between different societies, cultures, and language spheres, which makes the situation very different from intranational commuting.

The word 'commuting' also carries the meaning of regularity and continuity (Sandow & Westin 2010, 433); the travel plays a central role in the lives of people who have chosen this kind of lifestyle. Economists Alexandros Tassinopoulos and Heinz Werner have defined commuting as one type of work migration, which is not accompanied by change of home or home-country (Tassinopoulos & Werner 1999, 2); such people are willing to rather actively move between two geographical places than to change their home. Continuous commuting is encouraged by the commuters' family life and a strong wish to spend at least some time at home. Compared to moving to another country, commuting helps to maintain communication with acquaintances and close relations back at home quite actively. Also, it is easier to return if needed when people are commuting between neighbouring countries.

Commuting can be an also alternative for a family in which all members are not able to or do not want to move (Van der Klis & Mulder 2008). It is mainly a solution in cases where both partners work and one is not willing to leave because of a lack of desirable position in the destination country (van der Klis & Karsten 2009, 342). In some cases, one partner cannot move to another country due to family reasons, such as the illness of a relative, elderly parents, or other familial responsibilities. The absence of a social network can also be a problem for a family with small children, since in a new country they would not have an established network of people to help them out, if needed. Parents also think about their children when they make the decision to start commuting. When children have started school the parents do not want to change it and take the child from his or her friends (see Siim in this volume for further discussion.) Also, immigrating to another country means that education in the Estonian language and history would not be as readily available as back home.

Despite the fact it is primarily men who commute and their partners stay at home, the decision of working abroad is made mutually by the family, although the children's opinions are usually silenced (Siim & Assmuth 2016). The choice to take on the commuting way of life is often made to improve the wellbeing of the whole family and this choice affects all its members economically, socially, and emotionally (Sandow & Westin 2010, 434–435). Family members back home can be

seen at least as in a supportive role even if they are not the initiators nor the primary reasons for commuting. The situation where the husband is working abroad and other family members stay at home can be seen as a compromise where the family can get all the positive impacts of working abroad (better income, social support, and, in some cases, longer vacations at home), but at the same time some or even almost all of the members do not have to be highly mobile. Due to these reasons, many researchers have seen international commuting as an alternative to emigration (Green, Hogarth, & Shackleton 1999; Apsite, Lundholm & Stjernström 2012). Commuting between two countries does not affect people's lives as much as settling in another country long-term would.

Even when travelling back and forth is highly connected with social and family reasons, the main motivation to work abroad is the rise of income. Working in another country is most of the times motivated by financial goals (Massey et al. 1993) – saving for later investments, buying necessary equipment for the household, or even in some cases to provide luxury goods. Among men working in blue-collar or skilled labour sectors, the most common goals are buying a house or a car, starting their own businesses, or securing their retirement (Telve 2015). Periodically working abroad can also be seen as a solution to overcoming the family's financial crisis (Rapoport & Docquier 2006), for example job loss or debt repayment. After a short and intensive period of working abroad, the men return home and invest their income, helping to secure the family's wellbeing for longer time frame (Sandow & Westin 2010, 434). Sociologist Swanie Potot has compared long interval cross-border commuting with the alternative economy that spread during the Soviet era, when official and fully legal working and living practises could not secure the family's well-being (Potot 2010, 251). For example, sociologist Alena Ledeneva has written about how networks in the Soviet Union were used as a strategy to gain the resources that were not accessible due to the widespread deficit (Ledeneva 1998, 104). Commuting can be similar kind of solution for the system back in the home country – economic crises, lack of jobs, and low wages can create the situation where people are trying to find a solution no matter what.

Previous research has even shown that, even despite problems such as nationality-based discrimination in the working country, horrible living conditions, and the stresses of back and forth travelling, international commuting continues on. Workers tolerate their lower social status in a foreign country mostly due to their economical need, but they do not see their life permanently or more intensely (changing citizenship or home country) connected with the country they are working at the moment. Their goal is not to assimilate with the new country nor to conform to it; commuters see themselves as foreign workers and therefore distance themselves from the locals and from migrants living there.

Cross-border commuting is very visible around Europe; the *emic*-perspective, understanding what and how people themselves in this situation think, is very important in better understanding the community who is always on the move. Over time it is becoming a more and more relevant topic for different stakeholders and we need further mobility research concentrating on that.

Methodology

My article is based on the qualitative research for my MA thesis, which I defended in January 2015. For almost a year, from the end of 2013 to the end of 2014, I conducted fieldwork that included an online questionnaire about working abroad and close relations that had 149 responses, online fieldwork in Facebook groups that are formed by Estonians who are working in Finland,[2] and observations in the Tallinn harbour. But the most important part of my fieldwork was in-depth interviews; these included four thematic sections: working abroad, close relations, change in economic behaviour, and future plans. Within the fieldwork period I had 13 key-informants whom I met several times and I also had some contact with their family and friends.

The sample included only men who are working in construction, in factories, at shipyards, or in

the waste sector. Mostly they were working below their level of qualification and doing manual labour jobs that do not need any specific qualification. In my article I therefore draw a distinction between unskilled manual labour, which I call 'blue-collar labour', and 'skilled labour', which requires a specific qualification within previously named sectors. Skilled labourers do more demanding jobs in their field – carpentry, electrical, plumbing, etc. The sample was found by the public call on online social media groups and I continued with the snowball method. The group of informants was limited by the gender and the field of profession due to statistical reasons – it is the biggest commuter group between Estonia and Finland, as 85% of all commuters are men and the construction field alone captures 43% (Krusell 2013). I wanted to describe the lives of people who form the most visible group among commuters and their similar kind of lifestyle enabled me to draw preliminary conclusions about the commuting way of life in Estonia-Finland transnational sphere.

People in my research have worked in Finland for a time period ranging from a few months to more than ten years. They regularly travelled between Estonia and Finland – many returned home at least once per month, but also a pattern of ten days abroad and three days at home was frequently mentioned. Seven of my informants had a long-term partner or spouse who continued living in Estonia. Eight of my informants had children, and in six cases, these children were under 18 and still living at home. All the informants maintained daily or at least weekly contact with their families using international calling or online communication. All the quotes from the interviews are marked with the name or pseudonym and age of the informant.

The analysis below is based on thematically categorising the fieldwork data. All the subthemes – the normalisation of commuting, the combination of professional competence and flexibility, the periodic working patterns to maximize income, and the commuters' future perspectives – are created based on the fieldwork experiences and the informants' answers; these subthemes aim to grasp the inside group perspective on the changes that follow working abroad.

Commuting changes the way work is done

Most of the time commuting has been depicted as a voluntary choice that is characterised as being non-permanent (Masso, Mõtsmees & Eamets 2013). The workers who are in the process of thinking about commuting or have just started it emphasise the temporariness of the period when they are working abroad. In most cases, the choice to work abroad is initially purposeful and meant to end after the goal is reached (Favell 2008, 703). Based on my informants' experiences, after some period of working abroad, the people get used to the higher incomes and see how it effectively helps to secure their family's wellbeing, so they continue cross-border commuting even after the specific goal is reached. This decision is tightly connected to the emergence of new spending habits and living patterns, which can only be continued with the higher income available abroad. In addition, the men frequently mention the better social benefits, working conditions, and a more reliable and humanely organised work system in Finland as reasons why they continue this way of life (Telve 2015). As sociologist Mirjana Morokvasic has pointed out, a worker's ability and openness towards mobility can be seen as a form of capital that can be used as a resource to secure the best position in the labour market. Mobility provides an advantage to finding even better earning jobs in the working country, which leads commuters to continue their mobile lifestyle. (Morokvasic 2004, 11.)

The negative aspects of commuting between Estonia and Finland most frequently mentioned are the time, money, and energy spent on constant travelling. Constant moving demands patience, a strong will, and a specific purpose that motivates the workers to continue with this kind of living pattern. Communication researchers Chad McBride and Karla Mason Bergen have additionally pointed out that commuting can create struggles with the workers' previous community back home, and both personal and professional networks may weaken or even disappear. Commuters are seen only infrequently and mostly during holiday seasons, when the social context

is different. Additionally, commuting may affect the 'othering' of the cross-border commuters. Oftentimes the locals in the home country do not know the reality of the commuters' lives and opportunities, and this causes the negative stereotypes to spread – people working abroad are depicted as men looking for easy money, many times heavy consumption of alcohol and violence are mentioned; also other problems with locals and not integrating to the Finnish society are brought up. Due to that, the people who are periodically working abroad may be distanced from the local community and underestimated in the labour market (McBride & Bergen 2014). For example, during my fieldwork I have noticed an unwillingness in Estonian employers to employ people who have been working abroad. They say that the men who have experienced a better life in welfare countries will return there after some period of time, leaving the local employer with finding new workers. Employers are also aware of the possibility that after employing and retraining young men in their company, these young men will soon leave the work place after acquiring new skills to work for better wages in another country. Negative and vastly spreading stories are supporting the stereotypical understandings about commuting work, and the men who would like to return after some period of time do not find a chance to do so. Blending in to a new society, mixed with previously mentioned negative aspects of cross-border commuting, may motivate people to consider immigration as a more attractive alternative. So I would emphasise, as did sociologist Jon Horgen Friberg (Friberg 2012, 1602), that cross-border commuting can be seen as a pre-phase for permanent migration.

In order to gain the characteristics of a post-industrial labour market, where a worker can choose the number of working hours and sometimes even the place and time where and when he works, commuting work needs a different kind of management, workplace culture, and regulations (Sandow & Westin 2010, 434). In the context of the international blue-collar and skilled labour market, employers who are more open towards allowing flexible work schedules are highly valued. Their support can mainly be seen in giving the option of doing some working hours in advance, allowing the commuters to leave their posts already on Friday in the morning or noon and returning on Monday at noon. It has also been pointed out that sometimes it is worthwhile to work during one weekend and save the two free days for the end of the working period, so that they could leave the working country a bit earlier (Telve 2015). This system of flexible working hours and the strategy of collecting free days help the workers have longer weekends or even holidays every now and then. These kinds of patterns are mostly semi-legal and highly connected with the employer's position and willingness to make exceptions and risk with getting into trouble for letting his or her employees to work more hours per week than by law allowed. There is also the possibility of using holidays or taking a day off, but most of the time the commuters are really focused on earning as much money as possible and are not willing to miss a whole day's salary. From one perspective the practises visible among Estonians working in Finland can be compared with the situation in other western European countries, where the inflow of eastern European workers can be seen as new flexible labour supply (Burrell 2010, 300; Ruhs 2006, 17), but from another angle it is connected with exploitation (Janta et al. 2011), marginalisation, long and exhausting working periods, and worse working conditions in comparison to locals (Datta 2009).

All these previously mentioned aspects are visible in the Estonia-Finland sphere. Next I would like to concentrate on three specific characteristics: the normalisation of working abroad, professional competence and the workers' flexibility as preconditions for cross-border mobility, and the men's focus on working and earning as much money as possible and its importance inside the commuter group. I will conclude with some observations about future perspectives.

The normalisation of commuting

In some areas of Estonia, cross-border commuting, as well as also working abroad in wider terms, is very common. In some cases, it is mostly con-

nected with chain migration – the networks of friends or family members initiate commuting between Estonia and Finland. The commuters said several times that they first started to think about commuting thanks to encouragement from their acquaintances. The high number of commuter-workers between Estonia and Finland creates a situation where everybody knows someone who works abroad, and a personal connection can be the starting point for choosing this kind of lifestyle. The network of past, current, and potential commuters gives access to knowledge about practical matters, which can make starting much easier. Such groups also provide a positive image of commuting that is encouraging and equally relevant.

Within the last ten years it became very popular for secondary school students completing a programme in the trades to do their internship in Finland. Additionally, some easier tasks such as cleaning construction sites or other simple jobs were considered as suitable summer jobs for boys, and in some cases the first contact with working abroad were acquired during the teenage years, as Margus points out:

> Everybody was in Finland. Even schoolboys. [...] The school wasn't finished, but they said they want to go to work. Back then [in 2006/07] there were so many of these kinds of boys. They came, they were really young, knew nothing about the world and suddenly they became tough guys. (Margus, 48 years old)

In the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, the Nordic countries needed extra labour, and due to that, many young men took their chances and decided to go work abroad. Now, finding a position without previous work experience or Finnish language skills is a bit more difficult, but still possible. For example, during my fieldwork I met a young man who got his first position in Finland the previous summer, only a few weeks after graduating from high school. He did everything he was asked to do – cleaning, gardening, painting, and so on. He knew that he wanted to go and work in Finland, as it was the next logical step after graduating. His older brother had done the same thing about five years earlier and he felt confident that he would manage working abroad as well. The first contacts these young men make during their internship or first work places could later be useful for their careers. The income, which is quite high, also helps them to gain economic independence and working abroad can be seen as coming of age in our modern world. Men are starting to save money to buy a car or an apartment. Other expenses such as getting a driving license, buying clothes, or going out with friends were also often mentioned during the interviews. Working abroad helps to escape from the position of being dependent and to start moving towards the life they have always wanted, which was not available for them previously due to their families' poor socioeconomic background.

In some areas young men are almost expected to work abroad. In these cases, emigration from the home village is necessary in any case because there are no available positions and the men do not see that much of a difference between working in Finland or in the capital city, apart from earning at least twice as much abroad. Also, working abroad allows them to acquire a better social and economic position in a shorter period of time. It is common knowledge inside the group that working in Finland is manageable and quite easy, and that the move back is affordable in case something happens at home and they need to return. Additionally, since in many cases part of their social circle is already there, working abroad is seen as a reunion of friends, or is described as 'doing something together':

> I don't even remember why I went for the first time. I think it was because of my friends. Not because I needed to, but rather because I was bored. Others went; I had nothing to do by myself. (Pets, 29 years old)

The previous quote illustrates how open people are towards working abroad and how it is mostly so because of their social networks. The experiences of the people close to them motivate them to think about the possibility, and contacts abroad also make finding a job easier.

The decision to start one's career abroad could be connected to the choices of the previous gen-

eration. In blue-collar and skilled labour sectors, older male relatives play an important role in helping to find a job for their sons, nephews, or other younger relatives. When the previous generations are to some extent working abroad, chain migration emerges and the younger men follow their lead at some point. For example, during several summer holidays, Kristo worked for his uncle, who subcontracted for Finnish companies. After quitting his university studies, Kristo decided to also continue working in Finland. Now some of his close friends have also followed his lead. Kristo says that in the village he comes from, working abroad is so common that almost all the young men have worked abroad for at least some months, most of them in Finland. Starting to work abroad at the beginning of one's career could create a situation where young men do not have any or have only a minimum work experience from Estonia. For example, Kristo stated:

> I don't know if my economic possibilities have become better. Before going to Finland I had officially worked in Estonia only for a short period of time and I don't have this kind of hindsight. (Kristo, 26 years old)

As the previous quote illustrates, in some social circles and geographical areas, cross-border commuting has normalised and become the one strong alternative for working in the home country. In some cases, working abroad can fully compensate for the working experiences they would have in the home country.

Based on my fieldwork, working abroad is considered nothing special inside the group. Both of the possibilities of working either in Estonia or in Finland are described as equal alternatives and neither is seen as extraordinary to the wider community either. For example, Tõnu has brought out:

> Nobody asks anything about working abroad. Most of my male friends are also working somewhere else. They don't need explanations. (Tõnu, 38 years old)

This aspect is rather opposite to what previous authors (McBride & Bergen 2014) have mentioned. In the Estonia-Finland case, cross-border mobility seems to be so widely spread that it does not have any kind of special meaning from the commuters' perspective. People who are working abroad do not as feel strangers in their own community or distanced from other people.

The combination of professional competence and flexibility

Skilled and blue-collar manual labour competence can be conveyed from one country to another without problems (Hagan, Lowe & Quingla 2011), which makes active cross-border commuting tempting and realistic among these groups of people. Unlike professionals, skilled labourers are not so affected by language skills, and it is therefore easier for them to find a position that is connected to their preparatory studies or previous work experience. Many times people from the construction sector say that they are doing exactly the same work as they did before.

At the same time, some important characteristics of cross-border commuters are their flexibility and openness towards changing their working positions and professions. They have the knowhow to work in the transnational sphere and they are motivated to secure themselves the best available positions (Morokvasic 2004). Since normally it is only one person from a family who commutes, the worker can be flexible about location or pursuing other opportunities. Estonian men whom I have interviewed emphasise also that the person who would like to work in Finland cannot be picky and has to do whatever he can find. However, commuter workers do not fear losing their previous careers or that they have to do something that is not connected to their profession or qualification. Training and qualifications in a specific field as personal markers are only rarely mentioned. My informant Margus, for example, has been a teacher, a construction worker, and went to Finland to become a bus driver. The increase in their income compensates for the discomforts, life changes, and the symbolic fall in the career ladder experienced in some cases. A man's ability and openness towards doing whatever work that

needs to be done are seen by the commuter group as positive characteristics. Flexibility is much appreciated, and the main narrative that emerges from the interviews is that a person who wants to work will find a job and can manage both – in Finland and in Estonia. Due to that, at first it does not matter what kind of work a person has done before or what his profession is. Personal qualities and character are emphasised, and specific skills are seen as able to be learned in the process. Silver has described it as follows:

> If a man is okay, he is willing to do anything, then there is room for him in Finland. We don't want some kind of losers here. But all people have equal chances. (Silver, 32 years old)

Many positions are seen as non-permanent, and when the job or the position is not very favourable, the men are hoping that a better possibility will arise soon and change the situation. Cross-border commuters are open towards change, but at the same time living in two countries and travelling back and forth is expensive, and there is always a need for a relatively stable work position.

Openness towards retraining and acquiring new skills are also visible among cross-border commuters in some cases. Language lessons and vocational trainings in the host country create local cultural capital, and in fields with higher competition between candidates, such extra knowledge gives the worker an advantage. Training also gives a better opportunity to blend in with the new work environment. Local education gained in the host country helps to improve the status of commuter workers and the time and money spent on training is worth it. For example, before starting to work abroad, Margus was a construction worker in Estonia, but when he decided to go to Finland, he had a chance to retrain and become a bus driver:

> They needed bus drivers and created official positions for foreigners. The largest number of bus drivers came from Estonia. They went to Turku and Helsinki. And the state trained them. [...] I had never done the work I am now doing neither in Finland nor in Estonia. I hadn't been a bus or car driver. I had a chance to study it and then make a career in the same field. (Margus, 48 years old)

From the previous statement we can see how Margus made use of the opportunity that the Finnish state offered him at that moment. The new occupation helped him to integrate into the labour market and efficiently make a career in the new society. This kind of training can assist workers in finding a more permanent position and having a stable income. In some cases, although retraining could be useful for one's career, many commuters hesitate to invest in it. Most of the time the commuting workers are focused on the fast income and they do not want to spend their time and money on schooling. The only thing that would motivate them to sign on to courses would be seeing fast and guaranteed outcomes in relation to their present or future position. The men say that the training must ensure them a better position or salary, otherwise they would not even consider doing it.

Overall the Finnish work system is seen as a support for self-training and professional development. Some men say that their work skills have become better during the time they have been in Finland. They also see how the same is happening to their colleagues and how they can do more specialised jobs after a few years. As Kaimo stated:

> Those men who work in Finland... In Estonia, people say that if you can't do anything go to Finland and work as a construction worker. But in Finland they can lead you so well that in some years the men are specialists in their own field. These Estonians who stay in Finland for a longer period are not like other Estonians here. They are more precise; they do a good job. (Kaimo, 41 years old)

A worker's development depends on personal ambition and the motivation to invest in one's career. Many of the informants find that if a person is interested in additional training and is ready to work on learning new things, the social system of Finland makes it possible.

The periodical working patterns towards the income

In analysing the cross-border working data, patterns of the maximisation of working time and hence salary emerges for all the commuters. Salaries are compared amongst each other and money is often discussed in bars or on ferry boats. At the same time, money is the aim in working abroad, and also the explanation to why this kind of life is chosen. The larger number of work hours per month, even when it is illegal, is a mark of success, and it brings satisfaction from time spent abroad and is an important part of their self-image as 'hard-working men'. Long working days and high workloads are seen as opportunities, not as burdens or as discrimination against foreign labourers.

The good wages in blue-collar and skilled labour sectors are mainly connected to doing some extra work hours or days. In order to meet their income expectations, the men need to have long work days. For example, Sirgo has said:

> Estonians in Finland earn about 2000 Euros, some more, some less, that is the limit what they get. Some of the people earn 3000, but then those construction workers are doing a minimum of 300, 250 hours a month. (Sirgo, 32 years old)

The initiative comes from the workers, with the employers sometimes allowing it to happen, not the other way around. The men are eager to do extra hours per day or per month to earn more money. It is also not uncommon to keep a second job in Finland. Sirgo remembered the period when he had two positions at the same time:

> I was a fireman in Finland and the average salary was about 2000 per month. It was three times more than the money I got in Estonia. During my free days I had another job in the private sector, where I got paid per hour. (Sirgo, 32 years old)

Seasonal workers can also have more intensive periods periodically, where they have to work regularly 10 to even 12 hours per day. In some fields, as for example in the agricultural industry, where the harvest period is the most intense one, the employees already know that it is part of their working sector's pattern. Men in the construction field may experience a rise in working intensity and have to work longer days when the construction site is nearing a deadline. As was said before, the men usually do not mind the extra hours, as these periods are seen as a money-earning possibilities; complaints about the workload are rare.

A recurring characteristic in the interviews was that the men are in Finland to work. Only when there is enough workload do they feel that they are in the right place and not just wasting their time. It is much harder for them to bear half-length work days and slow periods, when there is little or almost nothing to do. For cross-border commuters it is especially difficult. On the one hand, they cannot go home, because there is always the possibility that the next day will be better and when they leave they could miss the possible chance of earning income. On the other hand, they do not have much personal life abroad and almost nothing to do with the enforced days off from work.

It is very common in the Estonia-Finland context that the men's lives are oriented towards their life back home. They do not have hobbies abroad and their personal networks there are most of the times limited to colleagues, so social activities outside of work are rather rare. Most of the free time is spent watching TV or being online. The men also pointed out that a lot of free time is spent on keeping in touch with the people close to them – Skyping, calling, or chatting on social media. Silver has described the life in Finland as follows:

> I am working 270 to 300 hours per month, 12 to 13 hours per day, lunch included. During the evenings I have three free hours to eat, drink a beer, surf online. At eleven I go to sleep to wake up at six o'clock in the morning. […] I don't need a life there [in Finland], my life is here [in Estonia]. There is only the money. (Silver, 32 years old)

As Silver illustrates, living by himself, spending his free time, and other pleasant activities are connected to Estonia and holiday time. Even his

evenings and free moments in Finland are not considered as 'free time', but rather part of his commuting period that has to be coped with to enjoy the free days in Estonia. Inside of the commuters' group, the binary time structure is very visible – the time in Finland is the work period, the time in Estonia is the leisure period. This kind of time structure determines the value and meaning of all activities. During the commuting period they try to save as much they can; the aim is to earn money and to live focusing on work. During the home period, the time spent in Estonia gives commuting a meaning. The money is spent on entertainment activities; men are much more social, and visiting friends and family members or spending quality time with the wife and children is much appreciated. The time spent in Estonia enjoying the outcomes of commuting work has to be fulfilling in order to motivate people to keep up with the constant travelling between the home and the work

Another characteristic of the working pattern of commuters is the irregularity of holiday and work periods. Commuter workers are more flexible than local workers and their individual holiday schedule depends on the work situation. Most of the time men are ready to change holiday plans if needed, and working on these exact days is especially profitable. Their way of thinking is 'I take a vacation when there is no work', so they can guarantee that they have taken advantage of all the possibilities to get higher income.

The men are also considerate of their coworkers; their holiday period is scheduled for periods when the company would have someone to replace the worker. This is especially visible in construction companies, where there is an exact number of workers needed to complete the work by the deadline. It is especially important to keep all the workers in their positions during the summer time when the construction sector is most active. In small companies, work is shared between two or three men and the rule is that only one of them can take days off; the others have to be present. Most of the time the men are mindful of others and consider their workload and the employers' needs. Mart for example has pointed out:

> The main thing is to get the work done. And we can take holidays when there is not so much work. So that there would not be a problem. When I am at home, my partner has to do more and then another time I have to work alone. When you are self-employed or you have a small company, you can decide more. (Mart, 45 years old)

Even when the men say that they will work whenever there is an opportunity for proper income, they still value the time spent in Estonia with their family and friends. Most of the men visit Estonia once or twice per month; some come every 10 days or even every week. Men with small children are the most active travellers; people who visit their friends and relatives, or come to Estonia only for hobbies or to take care of their property, come a bit more rarely. Longer vacations are mostly taken once or twice per year. Even when it seems that the men are quite satisfied with their position's higher income, the precarious positions in case of holidays and regulated working hours means that this issue is worth closer research.

Commuters' future perspectives

On the one hand, the theoretical perspectives about commuting (Chiswick 2000; Massey et al. 1993) emphasise that cross-border mobility is mostly targeted at the home country and most of its participants see it as non-permanent way of living. Mirjana Morokvasic, on the other hand, argues that mobility is necessary capital for workers and work-migration tends to be permanent. The essence of working abroad for extra money creates a situation where the people maintain their highly mobile lifestyle as long as they can to keep up the family life quality and economic possibilities (Morokvasic 2004, 7). Their capacity and will to be mobile are advantages to find better working positions. Because of that, most commuters are not searching for a way out of the highly mobile life style (Morokvasic 2004, 11). My fieldwork has shown how Estonian commuter workers rather see themselves continuously in the context of commuting between Finland and do not plan to work in their home country. Even many of my

informants say that if they would consider quitting cross-border commuting, the better living conditions and higher wages in Finland would lead them to choose Finland as their permanent place to live and work in.

The men point out that their friends have quitted commuting to live in the same country as their families. In many of these cases, the families choose to emigrate and move to Finland. Commuting between two countries consumes time and energy, and when people commute every week and have to rent a room or even an apartment, it is a remarkable expense. When families compare the living quality and opportunities in Estonia and Finland, and also the possible incomes, moving to Finland seems like a good and reasonable next step. My informant Sirgo, who has also thought about moving to Finland, explains himself:

> If I need to choose a country between Estonia or Finland, at the moment it seems to me that in Finland the state cares about its people. It is not like in Estonia where you work in a supermarket and you get 300 Euros per month and everything is spent on living and heating your apartment. You cannot find this kind of situation in Finland. (Sirgo, 32 years old)

At the same time, even when Sirgo decides to move, he would still be connected with his home in Estonia and he is not planning to sell the real estate he owns there. He is motivated to maintain his previous home because of his friends and family who live there, and he has emotional ties to his childhood places. He emphasises that all the reasons why he does not want to sell his property are at the same actually the reasons why he chose Finland as a place where to live. From Finland he can easily return whenever needed and he also knows that the distance is short enough to travel every now and then to visit Estonia.

Although moving to Finland could be tempting for many of commuter workers, it is not possible for all of them, for example due to family reasons. In most of the cases, the wife has her own career and networks in Estonia and she does not want to leave. This is the case for Margus, for example:

> My wife doesn't want to come. She has her work here, her own company. She doesn't have anything to do in Finland. She doesn't know anyone. But I am sure that she could definitely find some kind of work. (Margus, 48 years old.)

Even if the economic and welfare situation is better in Finland, cross-border commuters still hope that at some point it is possible to live and work in Estonia with the same quality of life. Tõnu has emphasized:

> I am waiting for the time when the wages are on the same level as in Finland, so I could come back to Estonia to live and work here. (Tõnu, 38 years old)

The main reason why men are not thinking about returning is the wage gap between Estonia and Finland. After getting use to the quality of life and higher standards of living, the lack of money they would experience in Estonia would be hard to bear. In some cases, the men are held back by loans that need to be paid, or they have not yet reached the sum of money they need for some kind of expense. In many cases returning at this point would mean a change of lifestyle for the whole family and the commuters do not have an adequate solution for returning without losing the benefits of commuting.

In some cases, the men see returning as a decision that comes with their retirement age. People are saving up for country homes or for renovating their properties and the plan is to return when they get too old to work. Returning after retirement is connected to nostalgia for the home country, their social networks and family ties, and the understanding that their real home is in Estonia. Mart has commented this:

> My homeland is still dear to me. I have thought that I would return for retirement age. In my age you are starting to think about it. I would like to be here [in Estonia]. All my networks are here, my friends and family, and without work I cannot see any point in staying in Finland. (Mart, 45 years old)

For the men who have commuted between the two countries for years, the decision is well reasoned and in most cases it is the mutual de-

cision of the whole family and they do not see themselves returning and quitting being mobile in the next few years.

Conclusion

Thanks to the current quite fast and affordable travelling system, cross-border travelling is accessible to a much wider circle of people than ever before. It enables regular and continuous travel between the destination and home country creates a whole new system of mobility. The Estonia-Finland case is especially interesting because of the cultural and language similarities and the short distance between the two countries that makes travelling even more convenient. We can even talk about the emergence of a transnational space, where the commuting way of life is an alternative to migration – people can increase their quality of life, but do not have to move permanently.

At the same time, we have to keep in mind that commuting work differs from both migration and working in the home country. This is an in-between category, connected to each person's work pattern choices and also with changes in both the receiving and home countries. While this non-traditional work pattern is becoming more and more popular, we need to understand the motivations of regular people who are choosing to live this highly mobile life.

In my article I pointed out how, in the Estonia-Finland case, we can see clearly the normalisation process of working abroad in home society. It is interesting to see how widely spread cross-border practises have lost its distancing effect within the community and gained the position of a monthly routine of the local people. The situation has also the impact on younger generations, who see working abroad as a part of the coming of age process or even as the most realistic career path for themselves. Cross-border commuting, as I have shown within this paper, needs specific preconditions and personal openness to gain as much as possible from the mobile kind of lifestyle. I emphasised the importance of professional and geographical flexibility in the context of commuting, and how mobility can also be seen as symbolic capital to use to find better positions. This is also connected to the men's ambitions to find better jobs and to increase their income. The value of working abroad is mostly measured in money and it is also the main motivation to continue the constant travelling. These jobs also have symbolic value, as they show the character of a man and is evidence that he is hard-working and invested in working abroad. Besides these aspects, I find necessary to emphasise the future perspectives of commuter workers. Contrary to the previous literature, Estonian men working in Finland think about cross-border commuting in a more permanent way or even consider the possibility of moving to Finland with their whole family. At the moment they find that the possible standard of living is better in Finland and if the wage gap between two countries stays the same, they would not consider leaving cross-border mobility.

I must stress that these are only preliminary results of continuing research process. Discrimination, marginalisation, and poor treatment of foreign labourers are unfortunately in some cases also part of the commuters' way of life in these context of Estonia-Finland cross-border mobility; these specific aspects are worth closer research and hopefully will soon gain the needed attention.

NOTES

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2 The biggest group is EstFin – Eestlased Soomes (https://www.facebook.com/groups/EstFin/?fref=ts) with 32 346 members as of 30th June 2016, but there are also group for Estonian entrepreneurs in Finland (3600 members) and for Estonians in Finland (6169 members).

SOURCES

Research material

In-depth interviews: 15
Online questionnaire answers: 149
Notes from online fieldwork in Facebook groups: Estonians in Finland (6169 members), FinEst – Estonians in Finland (20125 members), Estonian Entrepreneurs in Finland (3600 members)
Observation material: fieldwork notes and diary
All the research material is in the author's possession

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KEYWORDS

cross-border mobility, work-migration, transnationality