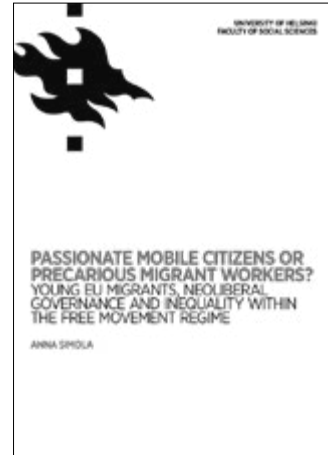


Passionate Mobile Citizens or Precarious Migrant Workers?

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My dissertation addresses the widening gap between the expectations young EU migrants may have regarding the opportunities existing within the area of free movement and the actual realities they may confront in their destination country. It investigates the reality in which young Europeans move within the European Union in search of work opportunities that would allow them to exploit their education, their skills and their passions, but who end up experiencing precarity.

The environment in which young EU citizens make use of their right to free movement is changing. Young, educated workers across Europe face persistent difficulties in the labour markets and are highly exposed to unemployment and precarious types of work, characterised by temporal and non-standard contractual relationships and insecurity (Chung et al., 2012; Samek Lodovici & Semenza, 2012). Furthermore, precarious work relations are

intrinsically defined by the lack of protections that welfare states provide to workers in full-time permanent work including guarantees of sufficient income during unemployment that reduce pressures to sell labour under disadvantaged conditions (Rubery et al., 2018).

Today, young people's prospects of achieving stable employment and financial independence are increasingly hampered into their early thirties (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Although education still generally provides the best protection against precarious employment, evidence show that this protective effect of higher education is eroding (Murgia & Poggio, 2014). Studies on young EU migrants' labour market outcomes are limited, but there are indications that this group may be disadvantaged in the labour market not only as young persons, but also compared to their national peers (Akgüç & Belabvy, 2019). Thus, instead of functioning as a stepping-stone, migration may also lead to labour market entrapment.

What is more, young EU migrants may not only face a labour market in their destination country offering fewer and different kinds of opportunities than they expected, but also their expectations regarding their rights as EU citizens may be thwarted. The European Commission has for decades been promoting the rights associated with EU citizenship, emphasizing the principle of equal treatment with nationals in other member states. This has created expectations of rights and equality. However, freedom of movement has never been formally unconditional. The growing criticism against EU migration in various EU member states has triggered national policies that seek to restrict EU citizens' freedom of movement and to reinforce conditionality in determining their rights. During the past ten years, several EU Member States have adopted policies that raise barriers to EU migrants' access to both welfare rights and residence rights. Rights are increasingly tied to employment status, a reason for which these restrictions have been assumed to affect EU migrants in precarious work positions in particular (Alberti, 2016; Dwyer et al., 2019; O'Brien, 2016). In my dissertation I propose that due to these consequential changes we need to develop critical research on EU migration.

Research puzzle

My original research interest was based on my observations on the very tough competition going on at the entrance-level labour markets in Brussels. I witnessed the considerable investments the ambitious young entrants arriving to this city were making in order to get in. I was intrigued by the question, what it means for the young Europeans to pursue EU mobility in labour market conditions where most opportunities are insecure,

temporary or unpaid. Through my study I sought to understand the reasons for which they may choose to stay in their destination country even when the circumstances they face do not correspond to the opportunities and rights they have previously associated with free mobility.

A common thread running through my dissertation is the observation regarding the influence of neoliberal governance on precarity experienced in this context. From the poststructuralist lens of governmentality, neoliberalism appears as a political discourse about the nature of rule that idealises the principles of free competition and enterprise as conditions of human freedom and individual choice (Larner, 2006; Rose, 1999). Its influence is not limited to its implications for political programmes, but it encompasses subjectivity itself through governance strategies that encourage individuals to view their own lives as a type of enterprise and themselves as active subjects responsible for their own well-being (Foucault, 2008; McNay, 2009).

Data and methods

I conducted the study in Brussels, which is a culturally vibrant global metropolis that stands out with its highly international job market that makes it an attractive destination for qualified workers from all around Europe. However, the attractiveness of Brussels also produces intense competition for qualified jobs, especially for junior positions. Precarious employment practices are common both at the top and bottom ends of Brussels' labour market, including the exploitation of internships as a source of very cheap or free qualified labour.

The three articles that form my dissertation all build on the same data obtained through one-time narrative interviews in

2014–2015. Additionally, my third article also draws on a complimentary dataset based on answers to written questions that I sent to my participants in 2018. The study is qualitatively comparative in a setting that includes one country of destination, that is Belgium, and four countries of origin that include Italy, Spain, Finland and Denmark. The empirical sample consists of 27 young adults originating from these countries, the majority of whom were in their late 20s or early 30s at the time of the interview. Sixteen of the participants are women and 11 are men, and their educational backgrounds represent a range of academic fields. They all have university studies at Master's or Doctoral level.

Instead of providing information regarding the incidence of experiences of precarity among the overall population of young, educated EU migrants, I have sought to understand the drivers and consequences of precarity in this context. Therefore, the study focuses on the experiences of persons who had moved to Brussels with the intention to work but had subsequently experienced unemployment and worked under precarious arrangements. The participants' work experiences during mobility included consecutive internships, temporary contracts, work through temporary staffing agencies and involuntary self-employment. Some had undertaken more or less casual work, often without written contracts. In addition, many were doing considerable amounts of voluntary work.

Critical perspectives on precarious EU migrations

In order to demonstrate the interconnections of the results from the articles, I start from an examination of the participants' original motivations for migration. The European Commission encourages young people's mo-

bility, which it portrays as a means to enhance their employability. In critical social research the concept of employability has been associated with the neoliberal imperative that every individual should be an enterprising subject, continuously working to improve the self (Leonardi & Chertkovskaya, 2017; Paju et al., 2019; Rose, 1998). Studies from distinct contexts of transnational youth migration have explored how young people's contemporary desire to become international is being triggered by this hegemonic discourse of self-developing subjectivity (Havering, 2011; Yoon, 2014). However, few studies have analysed migrants' subjectivities in the EU context.

The majority of the participants of my study had initially arrived in Brussels either for an internship or through the Erasmus student exchange programme, which had offered them both an institutional framework and financial support for migration. My data support the view that these programmes have normalised, among young, qualified Europeans, the practice of EU mobility and made it central to their ideals of successful labour market transitions (Courtois, 2020).

Furthermore, I show how my participants' migration was very often driven by their aspirations to do work offering opportunities for self-realisation, self-development and self-fulfilment. In line with David Farrugia's (2019) ideal-typical notion, that contemporary middle-class workers are 'subjects of passion', I apply and develop the concept of passion for the study of highly qualified EU migration, defining it as committed self-identification with one's chosen work or career.

Indeed, in my participants' narratives, mobility often appears as an instrument to achieving work corresponding to their passion. For some of them the passion was to work in a particular professional field or on a specific subject matter, while for many

others working in an international environment was a passion in its own right, that they described as an important part of their self-identity. Such passionate relation to work was also typically expressed by emphasising how unrelated their motivations regarding work and migration were to money. However, the self-entrepreneurial attitude towards mobility clearly encouraged the participants to tolerate unpaid work and precarious labour conditions as self-chosen and ‘normal’ (see Lorey, 2006). This needs to be seen partly as a result of their belief that the tolerance for precarious living and working conditions was the prerequisite for them ever achieving work where they could use their skills and realise their passion.

At the same time, it is also clear that it was their generalised exposure to insecurity that made it particularly difficult for many of them to reject their precarious conditions. Critically, the data shows that their insecurity was not only due to the difficult labour market, but also the way in which they were exposed to state policies restricting their rights as citizens.

It is important to note that, none of my participants were inactive. Even when they were not employed, they were all engaged in internships and other forms of unpaid work and training, while they often feverishly searched for paid employment. At the same time, most of them lived through periods of insufficient or no income, and were often effectively in need of income support. However, following a trend in Europe and beyond, Belgium has increased the conditionality of social entitlements for all welfare applicants. My study shows how the general welfare conditionality functioned in interplay with the conditionality rulings targeting EU migrants in particular, constituting barriers to my participants’ access to welfare state support. Most of those participants who had made claims for unemployment benefits or social assistance in

Belgium had been denied access, because they lacked the contributions required.

Moreover, Belgium has not only sought to control EU citizens’ access to its welfare system by restricting the conditions of social entitlements, but increasingly also by restricting access to legal residence. Belgium is not – by far – the only EU country that has sought to redefine the status of EU migrants (Mantu et al., 2020). The Belgian case is however particularly striking for its efforts to enforce conditionality through expulsions of EU citizens deemed unwanted on economic grounds. In 2011, Belgium made a restrictive interpretation of the EU Directive allowing Member States to withdraw the residence certificates of EU citizens who represent an ‘unreasonable burden’ on their social assistance system. During the past ten years, several thousands of EU citizens received an ‘order to leave the territory’ on this basis (Valcke, 2020).

Meanwhile, also the initial requirements for residence registration became increasingly restrictive regarding the requirement to provide evidence of paid work or self-sufficiency. Those participants who sought to register their residence were required to provide evidence of consistent, paid employment, but many of them were unable to provide such proof. Therefore, they were not granted the residence certificate, which is a key identification document required in Belgium for most administrative transactions and access to services. Some of them were told they had only three months to find employment, after which time they would have to leave the country.

Very central in the data was also the participants’ profound uncertainty of their rights. While the participants were unsure what the actual consequences of an expulsion order would be, many had considered it safer not to register their presence or, if they nevertheless had started the registration process, not to

claim social entitlements. The data clearly shows how depriving the young EU migrants from social protection and legal security increased their adaptability to their employers' demands for flexibility.

Finally, the comparative setting allowed me also to analyse how the welfare state arrangements in the participants' countries of origin influenced their situation. The welfare systems in Denmark, Finland, Italy and Spain differ greatly regarding the availability, generosity and conditionality of support they provide for young people and recent graduates. The limited access to benefits for young people in Italy and Spain often resulted in the participants from these countries not being entitled to income support in any country. For many of them, how much their parents were able to support them therefore became one of the most important determinants of their financial security during their time as migrants. This accentuated disparities between them according to the resources of their families.

At times, the parents were only able to offer their children the possibility of returning home and being part of the family household. However, the Italian and Spanish participants were often strongly reluctant to return. For most of them mobility was an attempt to escape the extremely precarious working conditions prevalent in their domestic labour markets and many had initially made the decision to migrate also to be able to move out of their parental home. Importantly, they also associated the return with abandoning their passion.

By contrast, the more universalistic welfare policies in the Nordic countries protected their young citizens to some extent, as they normally had access to benefits within these systems. When experiencing delayed or denied access to social protection in Belgium, even the young Nordics were often forced to

turn to their parents for financial support. However, long-lasting parental dependence was unusual for them. Some of them were able to draw money from their domestic welfare systems and this way to continue fostering their employability in Brussels through further education, unpaid work and searching for better jobs. Some others did not even try to engage with the Belgian system but instead returned to their countries of origin when they lost their jobs in Belgium. While their domestic labour markets were also generally perceived as offering opportunities for young workers, many young Nordics did consider returning as an option, were the conditions in Brussels to turn overly harsh.

Also the Nordic participants were often prepared to accept the requirements of a high level of flexibility and precarity, as long as the work experience gained was perceived as valuable. However, none of them undertook work in Brussels that was completely irrelevant to their professional goals. Meanwhile, refusing the idea of returning meant that many of the southern Europeans were forced to accept any work regardless of its conditions or content. Some of them held multiple jobs in parallel, sometimes combining unpaid professional work to maintain and develop their skills with low-skilled jobs for subsistence and legal security. This, however, meant less time to invest in their employability and, especially, time lost to recover from work.

All in all, the study shows how the young EU migrants who participated in this study were exposed to personal responsibility and precarity in both similar and unequal ways. Overall, the narratives contain descriptions of experiences of depression, exhaustion and burn out that ultimately forced some of the participants to return against their will. The study thus shows the human limits of the extreme flexibility, especially when young workers are made self-responsible for their

own survival. While the study does not systematically answer the question of whether the participants eventually landed more stable jobs – or ones that corresponded to their passions – the data indicates that the lengthy periods of precarity in many cases had negative implications for their careers, their life-transitions, their wellbeing, and even their health.

Conclusions

The previous studies often take as their premise that, since EU migrants are predominantly young, they are less dependent on welfare systems and are motivated to participate in the labour market even when their jobs are defined by precariousness (Lulle et al., 2019: 6). My study is critical about the idea that young EU migrants would be inherently flexible in a way that would intrinsically motivate them to participate in precarious work. I also interrogate the idea that welfare states would be of little importance for young EU migrants. I maintain that states' welfare and migration policies play a central role in structuring the transitions of young workers within the intra-European labour market. Even though their EU citizenship offers them relative freedom to make use of mobility to leave precarious jobs, this freedom has both structural and subjective limitations and is not distributed equally.

My study also points out some major controversies around the policies to which young EU citizens may become subject in the context of EU migration. European Commission continues to target young people with its key mobility programmes, but these are enforced in parallel with policies, which radically limit their opportunities to make use of the freedom of movement to develop their employability and to find work corresponding

their skills and their passions. Paradoxically, however, the barriers to rights that young EU migrants may face are actually apt to hinder their access to more stable and independent socio-occupational positions to which their rights are increasingly tied. Acknowledging the complex institutional drivers of precarity and its implications for young people's lives in this context opens important perspectives for future critical research on EU migration.

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