



Keynote speech

Ageing as a migrant from the East to the West

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I stand before you today as a migrant ageing in a ‘foreign’ country and as a professional aiming to increase the wellbeing of those ageing abroad.

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Where does it all begin? A Bulgarian saying posits: ‘We make plans, the mouse ruins them’. And so it was for me, and likely many others like me.

I planned to come to the Netherlands to complete a bachelor degree, experience a different culture and a vibrant student life and move back home. In fact, I never thought of emigrating!

In August 2003 I arrived in Groningen, the North of the Netherlands – against the will of my parents, without an accommodation to stay and with only a few pennies in my pocket. All I had was the motivation for a better education and more exciting life, and a network that made the move possible. Many people from my city Pazardzhik were already students in Groningen and helped me in the first months. Those first months were difficult! Bulgaria was not part of the European Union yet, heavy bureaucracy, institutional discrimination and lack of financial means made that time hard and I was practically busy ‘surviving’. There was nothing of the lovely student life I have dreamt of, I did not even like my studies. And yet I decided to finish it. After that, everything became easier.

After an initial cultural shock, I got acquainted with the life in the Netherlands. Yes, I did experience a cultural shock: I have been born and raised in (post-)communist Bulgaria and we did have banana’s and oranges only during Christmas (in fact those were part of our New Year presents) and no supermarkets with 5 different types of tomatoes and fruit from far lands. I had never seen a bankcard before, did not own a computer and things that were self-evident for many, were totally foreign to me. But I did get acquainted with the life in the Netherlands



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and since Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, I could receive financial support for my studies. So I decided to do a master. Having to work less odd student jobs allowed me to be a better student and while enjoying the student life I dreamt of I graduated with distinction from the research master Population Studies at the University of Groningen and ensured myself a position as a PhD student at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

During my studies I met my current partner, a young, smart and handsome man from Bavaria, Southern Germany, with whom I bought our first house in the Netherlands, married in 2018 and now have two children. We both have a 'good' job and live in our house in Utrecht – that is our 4 person 4 lingual household.

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We are now 19 years further and if I can be sure of something – that is that things worked differently than planned and that I am ageing as a migrant who came from the East to West!

But what does it mean to age as a migrant from the East to the West? Is that very different than ageing as a native or another migrant?

Good questions, he? But I have to be honest: I do not have a firm answer to these questions and in fact, I think that there is no one truly correct answer! Not in my point of view as a person! As a researcher I have learned one or the other thing. For example we have shown quite convincingly by now that there are certain similarities between all migrants and natives when it comes to ageing: Regardless of where we come from we want to remain healthy, social and engaged. We want to be with beloved ones and once becoming sick we wish to stay home for as long as possible. Yet, once we zoom in, we see enormous diversity of wishes, life courses and resources, all very important determinants of ageing well. Where we come from and the baggage we carry shape our ageing experiences and give a specific meaning to what it means to stay healthy, social and engaged. Some age well and happy, others are faced with bad health and insufficient financial means and third experience loneliness and feel socially disconnected.

And so, as you will see, my story of ageing as a migrant is just one of many...

The 'group' of migrants from the East is featured by enormous diversity!



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We can speak of diversity due to reasons to migrate (for example to study, work, marry, escape), age at migration (young vs. old or ageing in place vs. coming at an older age) and geographical diversity (East-West beyond EU). Moreover, the situation in the origin country matters: historical, political and economic (macro) factors play an important role.

Let me introduce to you a number of different East to West migrants:

Surely, if I say Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants to countries such as England, Germany and the Netherlands, many of you will think of the so-called guest workers from Central and Eastern Europe. Polish people working in construction and agriculture, Bulgarians and Romanians working in the cleaning sector or not working at all, not anymore. While these are definitely the most common profiles of migrants from the East, they are not the only ones. Diversity within the 'group' guest workers is enormous, from expats to low educated, from for example ethnic Bulgarians via Roma to Turkish Bulgarians. For the Dutch people among us: Did you know that the majority of Bulgarians in the Netherlands is from a Turkish origin? According to Statistics Netherland about 400 thousand people in the Netherlands come from CEE countries (EU), around 210 thousand are from Poland, 45 thousand from Bulgaria, 45 thousand from Romania and some 33 thousand from Russia, just to name the largest groups.

Then, we have students and those like me – (ex-)students. Once they finish their studies, some will stay, other will return and third will move to a different Western country in search for labour opportunities. Some never marry, others marry a compatriot, a person from the destination country or a third national, as we call them in a research language. People like my partner. According to Eurostat, 1.3 million students from abroad were undertaking tertiary level education across the EU-27 in 2018 and 44% of those had European origin.

A third type of CEE migrants are those who moved to marry. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the Netherlands, where researchers speak of the so-called 'Polish and Russian brides'. This phenomenon is relatively understudied however, so I cannot tell you much about it.

Migration from East to West is not restricted to the European Union and it is not always voluntary. Most recently, we observed an increased flows of refugees from Ukraine to mainly Poland but also other Western European countries. In the past we saw the migration of people from Former Yugoslavia. These flows of war or political refugees are accompanied by what I call the 'religious and cultural' refugees: Polish people escaping from extreme religious



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beliefs, Hungarians escaping from extreme right wing beliefs and homophobia. Soon I believe we will witness flows of Russians escaping Putin's regime.

Although strictly speaking no (longer) migrants, in the Baltic states but also other counties from the former Soviet Union, we find Russian minorities, people of age now, people who left Russia at different moments of time, most recently after the fall of the Communism and age in a country different than the one they have been born in.

Although in different geographical locations and migrating for different reasons, all these examples share a commonality. People arrived at younger age and those who remain are 'ageing in place' as a migrant from East to West. When speaking of east to west migration we often envisage the younger generations, but many people stay in the destination counties and age there. In fact, research has shown that at least half of all Eastern European migrants settle permanently in the country of destination. In the Netherlands, at present there are some 38 thousand people from CEE countries aged 55 or more, that is split into for example around 20 thousand Poles (in top 20 of the biggest groups older migrants), 3 thousand respectively from Bulgaria and Romania, 5.5 thousand from Hungary and 5 thousand from Russia and other smaller groups. Just to put these numbers in context, think about those 45 thousand refugees from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan or close to 60 thousand older migrants with Turkish origin.

Another less well known in Western countries migration flow is that of Eastern European women to Western and Southern European countries such as Austria, Germany and Italy. Those are middle aged to older women who migrate in order to care for older and sick persons abroad. The phenomenon is widely widespread in Italy. The so-called "badante women" are well known in Bulgaria and Romania, where towns are left without women, the men look after children, cook, do the washing and wait for money from their wives working abroad. Similar phenomenon is known to exist in Austria and Germany, with Slovaks taking the main role as care givers. Next to earning money, some of these women use migration to escape ruined marriages and never return, other find freedom and new, better life and bring their children to the destination country, while third live with a constant nostalgia and for the few visits when they can go home to hug their children and grandchildren. What research has convincingly shown is that these women, like other low educated guest-workers, often work in precarious working conditions, without social protection and often experience loneliness and deprivation.



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East-West vs. South-North: What have we learn?

Although never exactly the same, certain characteristics of the East-West migration resemble the South-North migration patterns. What have we learned from the past and what should we pay attention to? Without going into details, I would like to mention a few points that in my point of view deserve our attention.

1. Language: Learning the language of the host country is a must! The story of the first generation guest workers with Turkish and Moroccan background needs no repetition.
2. Social networks: Investing in social networks pays back! Research on loneliness has shown that it is widespread even among Western EU expats. We also know by now that Polish networks are often restricted to the nuclear family and that they find it difficult to establish friendships with natives.
3. (Institutional) Discrimination: Research on for example older refugees has shown that discrimination is one significant determinant of ageing well. People who experience discrimination are much more likely to belong to a cluster of less well ageing older adults. Discrimination is also positively associated with loneliness among older migrants.
4. Health: Especially for low educated guest-workers health is a of a paramount importance. Bad working conditions and minimum (social) protection lead to early age co-mobility. At play are early retirement schemes resulting in later life poverty and high care costs.
5. Living arrangements: Migrants are scattered in big cities and often live in deprived neighborhoods leading to bad living conditions and poor possibilities for improvement of their language skills and social networks.

Is it the right time to speak about older migrants from the East to the West?

YES!

We have learned a lot as we go, take for instance the example of the first generation guest-workers from Turkey in Germany, France, Denmark, the Netherlands and other Western European countries. Once old(er) in a foreign country, there is little one as a person and policy as a societal tool can change. All we can do is try to mitigate the challenges people experience.



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The East to West migration is a young phenomenon with people who have not yet reached very old ages. Let's not wait until people become in need for care to give urgency to the phenomenon. Like with all migrants, migrants from the East bring challenges and opportunities, every challenge can be turned into opportunity and every missed opportunity becomes a challenge!

We are the professionals of today. We are the experts of our own countries. We together can make a difference. I would like to end with a great quote from Mother Teresa: "You can do things I cannot, I can do things you cannot; together we can do great things!"

Thank you!

