Contextual and institutional factors of migration. Social ties and belonging

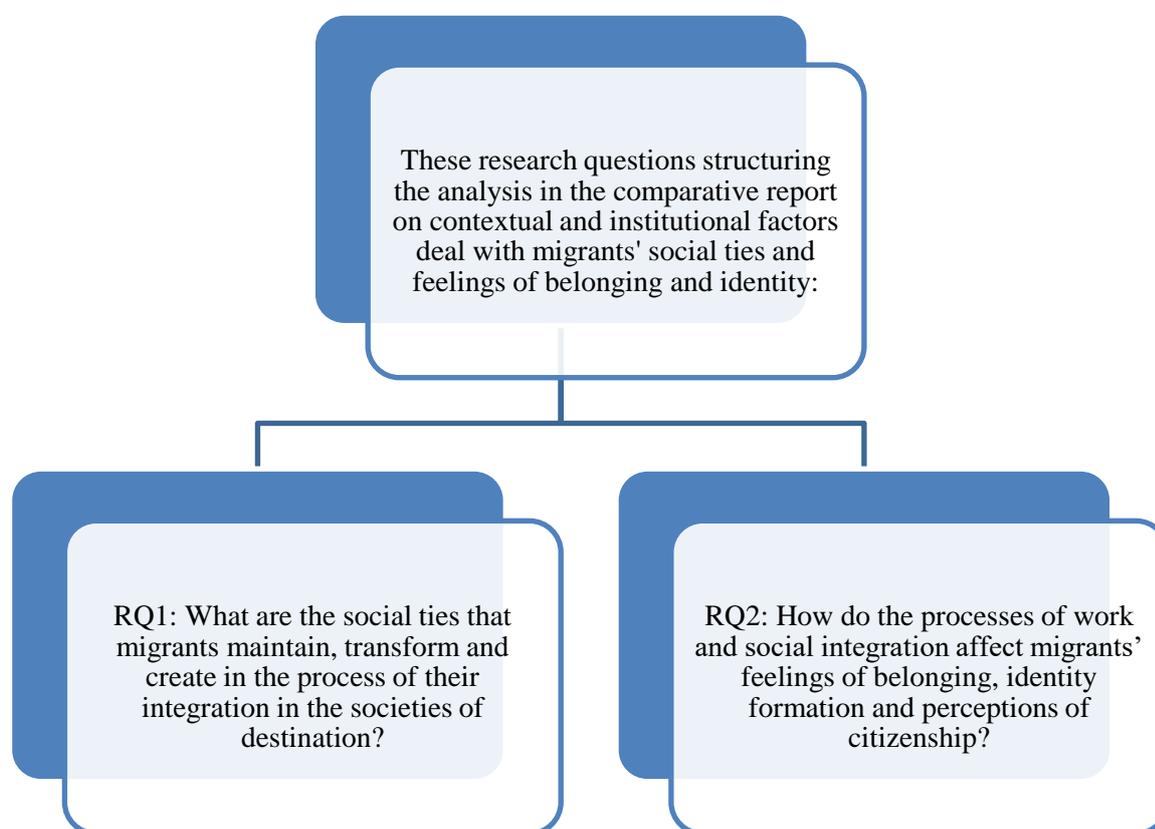Siyka Kovacheva, Ionela Sufaru & Octav Marcovici

INTRODUCTION

This briefing presents the main findings through the second two research questions (RQ) of the comparative analysis of the contextual and institutional factors of migration as revealed by the qualitative interviews with migrants conducted within the framework of WP4 'The lived experiences of migration' of the Growth, Equal Opportunities, Migration and Markets (GEMM) Project. This briefing deals with the challenges that migrants face in their early adaptation in the destination countries (RQ1) and the professional and career trajectories of migrants (RQ2).

These research questions structuring the analysis in the comparative report on contextual and institutional factors deal with migrants' social ties and feelings of belonging and identity:

RQ1: What are the social ties that migrants maintain, transform and create in the process of their integration in the societies of destination?

RQ2: How do the processes of work and social integration affect migrants' feelings of belonging, identity formation and perceptions of citizenship?

FINDINGS

RQ1: Experiences of integration are highly influenced by migrants' perceptions of the relative importance of their social ties 'before' (prior to departure) and 'after' (when already in the destination country).

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Maintaining active relationships with family members and friends remaining in the host country is not always easily achievable and sometimes not desired by migrants.

Creating new families, friendship, neighbourhood and collegial ties is often more demanding than anticipated by migrants. In the new social context, keeping 'open doors' to the communities of co-nationals generates a different model of integration compared to the 'open doors' approach to the communities of locals and migrants from other nationalities.

Strong and weak social ties exist in a complex interplay which is individual and specific to each migrant; however, the way the migrant is developing one or other of these ties is significant for his or her social position in the destination country.

> *"My friends, or my closest ones, are Bulgarians. We got introduced through work, I would even say a long time ago, I was working with these friends as early as 2013, but since then we have been in contact with each other, we meet weekly, or every other week, we talk on the phone. In general, they are my closest friends there."* (BG.UK.AC.1.M.30)

> *"We see much more rarely that group of Italian friends. Now, our group of friends are families like us, with kids; we spend our weekends with other families, we visit some museums... Maybe we have a lunch or a dinner together. There are a lot of free events for families in London. Now our friendships are no longer with Italians, but with Europeans."* (IT.UK.AC.2.M.35)

> *"We hang out with Romanians because we are friends, they come to us, we go to them [...] with the Spanish we only meet on the stairs"* (RO.SP.AC.2.F.46).
>
> *"We talk with people we know, most of them Romanians, but not Britons. [...] After 6 years here, I cannot say I have English friends."* (RO.UK.AC.1.M.25)

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Any policy measures that facilitate the interaction between migrants and the communities in which they live would improve the opportunities for their desired pattern of social integration, for example financial support for voluntary associations with mixed membership in terms of nationality.
- Campaigns for greater tolerance and understanding of cultural diversity might reduce tendencies towards discrimination of people from different nationalities and ethnicities.
- Family-friendly policies in the EU countries contribute to the quality of life of their citizens and are highly appreciated by labour migrants who rely on a wide support network, at least in the initial stages after the move. More information about their entitlements to parental leave, childcare opportunities and flexible work would benefit migrants' social integration.

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FINDINGS

RQ2: Migrants experience a complex renegotiation of cultural and political boundaries in the destination country while at the same time the mobility has an enriching impact on migrants' sense of European identity.

In all four countries of reception, migrants speak about the existence of negative images and stereotypes of certain migrant groups and sometime of the migrant status as such.

The development of multiple spaces and communities of belonging is often reflected upon as a positive outcome of the migratory process. At the same time, notions of one's country of origin identity can be strengthened when challenged by the different social and cultural environment in the destination country.

In the context of the Brexit referendum in the UK, our study shows that concerns about mobility rights are weaker than expected, in part because of the persisting confidence in EU citizenship. Perceptions of European citizenship, instrumental and based in pragmatic logic as it may be, nonetheless provides reassurance in situations of political turmoil and insecurity.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Defending and increasing the freedom of travel for the EU citizens will alleviate the Ensuring access to educational mobility for those less privileged in terms of less developed regions, lower social class and lower skills-levels is highly recommended.
- Ensuring access to educational mobility for those less privileged in terms of less developed regions, lower social class and lower skills-levels is highly recommended. In the legal and political terrain, the identity-nationality link deserves special attention since it sometimes determines migrants' decisions to apply or not for the citizenship of the host country.
- Measures aimed at strengthening EU citizenship and expanding access to permanent residency and dual citizenship rights may exercise soothing effects on the EU labour markets and the overall mobility situation in Europe.
- Migrants from within the EU act as a force for greater political and cultural integration at the European level and should be valued and supported.