

Migration as an Element of Young People's Life Strategies¹

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Abstract: In this article our main interest is oriented toward the question of the extent to which immigration is an element of life strategies of the young generation in Europe that formerly experienced communism. Is it possible to see differences in emigration patterns as a potential or actual life experience of young people, starting from disparities in socio-economic development? Within the compared countries, we have followed some aspects like the cost of transition, position of young people on the labour market, etc., and tried to explain decisions to emigrate. We investigated the youngsters willingness to gain new experiences as a result of their susceptibility to the pressure of consumerism. As no other age group, the young generation experiences tensions resulting from a clash of global patterns of the "appropriate" life offers and abilities to claim them. In our opinion, these opportunities are potentially one of the most important factors determining the choice of "alternative" pathways in their life. Taking into consideration the affluence of the compared societies and their labour market, emigration should have become the element of young people's life strategy's in some ex-communist countries much more often than in others. If young Hungarians intend to combine gainful employment with education and emigration, therefore, is for them, first of all, an **opportunity** to gain new life experiences, for others, like young Bulgarians, Latvians, Romanians and even Poles, emigration is seen more as a *necessity* related to pursuing their own life ambitions otherwise unavailable in their native country. Therefore emigration becomes an element of their life strategy even if it means taking up gainful employment below their qualifications.

Keywords: *consumerism; life experiences; post-communist societies; youth unemployment.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *consumerism; experiențe de viață; societăți postcomuniste; șomajul tinerilor.*

Introduction

The development of the processes of globalisation, especially economic ones, made mobility a core feature of the contemporary society. Systemic transition in the Central and Eastern Europe, including the accession to the EU of the majority of countries previously locked behind the Iron Curtain, triggered processes of mass migration. For the large majority of Poles, Romanians, Hungarians, Bulgarians and Latvians (as well as other Central and Eastern Europe na-

tions) disparities in economic development made western societies an incomparably attractive space with better living standards than those offered by their countries of origin struggling with transition.

Mass migration from the new EU member states is encouraged by demographic problems caused by ageing in majority of western societies. Growing population of elderly people has been imposing increasing burdens on the working age population which forced western societies to open up for migration from the Central and Eastern Europe. Two factors – the institutional

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one rooted in founding principles of the European Union, namely the free movement of people, as well as the demographic one – gave Eastern and Central Europeans a new space of opportunities in the form of emigration.

However, the emigration process has mostly been driven by cultural changes which have affected societies of Central and Eastern Europe since the early 1990s. Ever since the turn of the 20th and 21st century, consumption and high standard of living have been perceived as primary factors determining one's position in post-communist societies, similarly to Western societies since the 1960s (Bell, 1989). The pressure of consumerism has come with a variety of deficits and shortcomings, or rather modernisation delays, as part of the legacy after the fall of communism.

Young people is representing a social group exceptionally vulnerable to the pressure of consumerism. They seem to feel themselves particularly frustrated with their limited ability to pursue their aspirations focused on one single goal: "to have". In terms of consumption, they are much more susceptible to new cultural trends than adults for whom deprivation was part of everyday life in the communist reality. On the other hand, younger generations also seem to be a social category that is especially open to new opportunities created by the accession to the EU. Young people are the best example to justify the thesis of unification of life ambitions and aspirations under the pressure put by the global society. At the same time, young people are the most mobile category, ready to leave their country of origin to fulfil plans and life aspirations.

Our interests focus around this very question of the extent to which immigration is an element of life strategies of the young generation in Central and Eastern Europe that formerly experienced communism. Regarding the disparities in socio-economic development between the former communist

bloc and the West, is it possible to see differences in emigration patterns as a potential or actual life experience of young people?

This article was written as a part of international project on young generations in selected Central European and Asian countries². This analysis covers five Central and Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Hungary. We refer to a variety of sources of different status that are not always comparable and we are aware of limitations of the thesis we expressed. This type of approach however seems necessary as only a few sources on this subject exist.

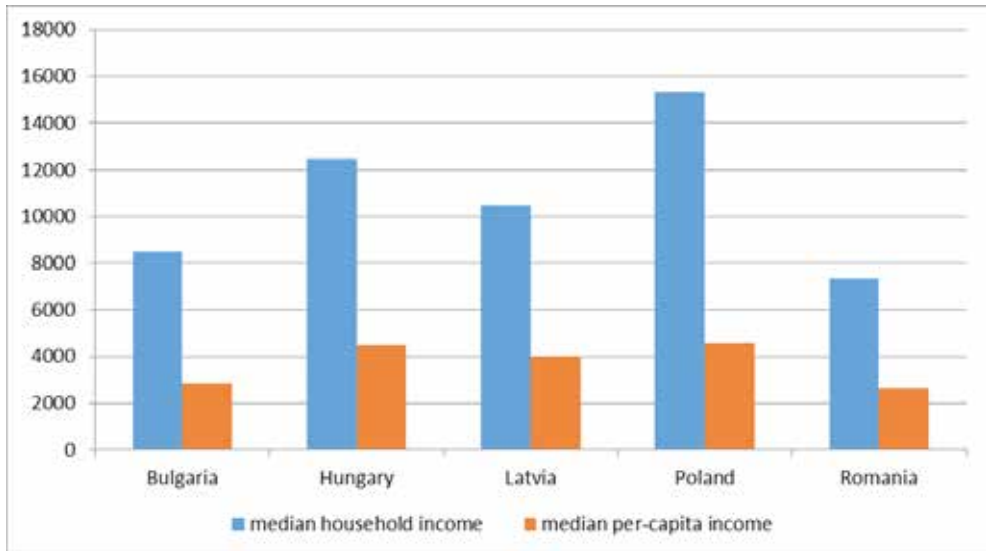
Socio-economic contexts of young emigration from Central and Eastern Europe

All attempts to understand and explain the migration decisions by young people require further context on the background they grow up in and operate, and its opportunities and limitations. It is of course different in each of Central and Eastern Europe states, all of which already had a specific political, social and economic system at the brink of transformation in the beginning of the 1990s, which then resulted in taking various paths of transition from communism to democracy and from central planning to market economy (Aslund, 2010). The systemic transition in Poland, Hungary and Latvia was characterised by rapid, shock-like changes, although in each of them it was different. In Romania, despite the revolutionary nature of the transition (Mitulescu, 2015), and in Bulgaria, the process of political and consequently economic transition was extended over a longer period of time.

The affluence of the analysed Central and Eastern European countries (in terms of its economic development measured in GDP per capita) allows us to notice a certain par-

allel in the chosen way of transition. In the mid-1990s, Hungary definitely led in terms of GDP per capita, followed by Poland. The

remaining countries had a GDP per capita no bigger than 6,000 dollars.



Source: own study on the basis of: Phelps and Crabtree, 2013.

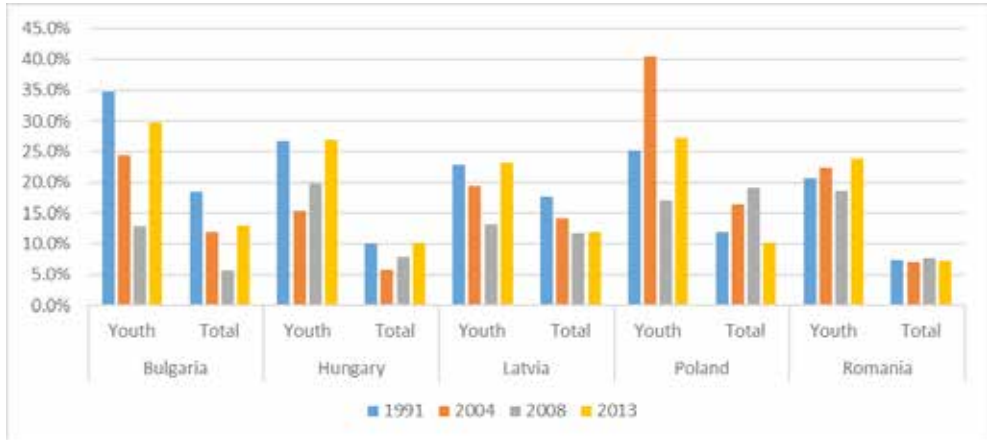
Figure 1: Median of incomes of households and per capita (averaged data from 2006-2012)

Over nearly 20 years of transitional changes including the accession to the EU, Latvia experienced the most dynamic economic development (it grew nearly five times), which resulted in reaching the economic growth comparable to Hungary and Poland in the same period of time. Simultaneously, despite dynamic economic growth in Romania and Bulgaria, these countries are relatively characterised by a clearly lower level of affluence (Domalewski and Szymborski, 2017).

Disparity in the level of economic development of the compared Central and Eastern European countries is reflected in the economic situation of their households (Figure 1). Households in Poland and Hungary receive the highest income, whereas households in Romania and Bulgaria – the lowest. The key factor however is the income per one member of household, and it oscillated between 4,000 and 4,500 dollars in Poland, Hungary and Latvia, but is lower

than 3,000 dollars in Romania and Bulgaria. Prospective post-emigration earnings could seem very attractive for majority of Central and Eastern European nations, and particularly for Romanians and Bulgarians, due to an especially big gap in affluence between these two countries and the Western societies.

However, it is not the affluence of the compared nations but the position of young people on the labour market that seems to be the key to their potential decisions to emigrate. It is however not characteristic for young people in Central and Eastern Europe, because in majority of contemporary societies unemployment is especially noticeable among young people, both in the Eastern and Western part of the European Union. Let us just mention that in 2016 the EU unemployment rate was 8.9%, whereas youth unemployment rate (people aged 25 or younger) was 18.8%.



Source: Based on: ILO. Key Indicators of the Labour Market, as in Szafranec and Szymborski (2016), *Reaching adulthood: work, privacy arrangements, standard of living...*

Figure 2: Total and youth unemployment in the 15-24 age group in selected (post)communist countries³

It is due to the fact that a crisis or economic slowdown particularly strongly affects young people's job prospects (Figure 2). Within the compared countries, the cost of transition was the highest for young Bulgarians where youth unemployment rate was 35%. The cost of the economic slowdown from the beginning of the 21st century was especially burdensome for young Poles, where in 2004 youth unemployment stood at 40%.

The second half of the first decade of the 21st century shows a clear decrease of youth unemployment, which is undoubtedly rooted in the accession to the EU of the compared countries and the opening of EU labour markets (despite some restrictions imposed by some "old" EU members on the citizens of the new members states). However, the world economic crisis of 2008 once again caused an increase in youth unemployment, with Bulgaria (30%), Poland and Hungary (27%) worst affected, and Romania and Latvia affected to a lesser degree.

Unemployment, which as already mentioned affects young people first, and a perspective of securing a job in Western Europe, which to a certain degree means fulfilling

young people's own life ambitions, are both among factors strengthening the decision to emigrate. However, there are more of them.

The accession of Central and Eastern European countries to the European Union opened up new opportunities for young students. Student exchange programme ERASMUS became a chance for many young students from post communist countries to leave their country of origin for the first time and meet new foreign cultures. However, the nature of the programme means that its beneficiaries include first and foremost young people from families of a rather higher social status with a certain cultural capital. It is worth mentioning here that for 41% of students the factor limiting their chances to use Erasmus programme is their not sufficient command of a foreign language (36-58%, depending on the country)⁴. However the top barriers are of financial nature - some potential users are concerned that the awarded bursary will not be able to cover all the costs (therein). This however does not change the fact that *Erasmus* remains a factor supporting emigration of young people and even if it is only a short episode in their live, for a group of young

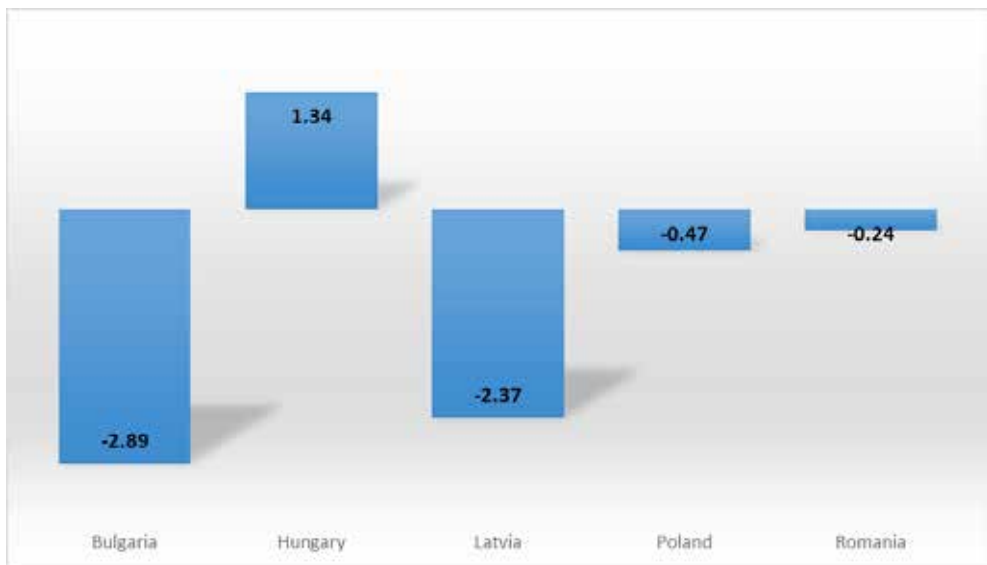
people (its size is difficult to establish due to lack of data) it could and most likely does strongly influence their future decisions regarding emigration.

Emigration in Central and Eastern Europe – scale and determining factors

For some citizens of Poland, Hungary, and Latvia in 2004, and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the accession to the EU opened up new emigration opportunities, with an offer of higher living standards than in their country of origin, although they often had to pay for that by taking up employment below their professional qualifications.

However, due to on the one hand a global “pressure” promoting certain living standards and on the other limitations of a local labour market, leaving the country of origin was often perceived as an alternative in life.

This however does not mean that the readiness for leaving the country of origin is a function of this country’s socio-demographic situation. On the contrary, the strongest emigration tendencies are displayed on the one hand in a country that has a distinctively high level of political, social and economic development (Latvia) and on the other in a country that is relatively poor with transitional changes extended over the time so that only the external factors (the perspective to integrate with the EU), in fact, enforced real changes (Bulgaria).



Source: On the basis of: CIA, data for 2012.

Figure 3: Net migration rate/1.000 population (2012)

Additionally, among the compared countries only Hungary has a positive net migration balance. This however does not mean that Hungary is an especially attractive country in terms of living conditions, but rather that due to political and historical factors, Hungary is treated by migrants as a

transit country – a stop on their way towards Western Europe.

Bulgaria, Latvia, Poland, and Romania are among those Central and Eastern European countries where emigrants outnumbered immigrants (Eurostat, 2016). As already mentioned, the two former countries

are characterised by the largest outflow of population (respectively 2.9 and 2.4 emigrants per 1,000 residents). However, emigration trends in both of these countries have been different in the past 15 years. At the beginning of the 21st century in Bulgaria the scale of emigration has been gradually decreasing, however the net migration remains negative (National..., 2012). The migration ratio in Latvia seems to be more dependent on social and economic conditions, both national and international. The relatively stable

level of international migration after Latvia joined the EU saw a rapid increase at the beginning of the economic crisis of 2008 and only in 2010 did it come back to a relatively stable level (Publicētās Centrālās statistikas pārvaldes mājaslapā 2013).

The basic emigration generating factors include a higher level of socio-economic development in the West and hence higher living standards, but first of all a facilitated access to the Western Europe's labour markets after the accession to the EU.

Table 1: Selected EU countries with a high proportion of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe among all migrants

Main destination countries (% of migrants holding local passports)									
Germany		Ireland		Spain		UK		Hungary	
Turks	18.2	Poles	21.4	Romanians	15.9	Poles	16.9	Romanians	19.7
Poles	8.5	British	21.3	Moroccans	15.5	Indians	6.9	Germany	12.9
Italians	7.1	Lithuanians	6.5	British	6.8	Irish	6.2	Chinese	11.3
Romanians	4.6	Nigerians	3.8	Italians	4.1	Pakistani	3.9	Slovaks	6.0

Source: EUROSTAT 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/1/1c/Main_countries_of_citizenship_and_birth_of_the_foreign_foreign-born_population%2C_1_January_2015_%28%C2%B9%29_%28in_absolute_numbers_and_as_a_percentage_of_the_total_foreign_foreign-born_population%29_YB16.png.

Poland and Romania are not characterised by such strong outflows of population as Bulgaria and Latvia, but due to the size of their populations, the amount of their citizens in the UK, Germany and Ireland (GUS, 2014, 2) and respectively in Spain, Italy and Germany (Mitulescu, 2015) is clearly far more noticeable than in case of Bulgarians of Latvians. (Table 1).

Emigration destinations are mostly selected based on economic factors, as well as similarities between the language of the country of origin and destination (Romania) or the command of the destination country's language (Poland). A network of connections – such as earlier migrations of relatives or acquaintances – is also a significant factor (in a longer term) (Mitulescu, 2015). That is the way “potential” emigration channels are created opening up new alternative life options, for example for young people, which as it turns out is often selected.

Emigration in the life plans of young people

Let us first look at the question: to what extent do young generations include leaving the country in the near or more distant future in their life plans? We are talking here only about plans conditioned on several factors, among them the most important ones could be the command of a foreign language.

In Poland, there is no data that could explain to what extent young generations include readiness to go abroad in their life plans. However, periodical results of Social Diagnosis indicate that in 2007 almost 12% of Poles declared intent to take up gainful employment abroad. In 2009, first and foremost due to the effects of the world economic crisis, this percentage was reduced to only 6% and six years later (2015) reached almost 7%. At the same time working abroad

is situated at the top of life choices of the unemployed, as one in five of them declares willingness to leave the country in order to get a job (whereas among people in work the share is 7%). Additionally, education is also a factor separating intentions to take up gainful employment abroad. Poles with secondary education and basic vocational education are among most interested in leaving the country, whereas the least interested Poles are those with tertiary education and basic education (Diagnoza Społeczna, 2015). In case of people with tertiary education, a limited readiness for economic migration is most likely a result of pros and cons analysis. After the first wave of migration, the number of jobs requiring university graduate level of skills was strongly limited, and therefore people had to accept job offers below their professional qualifications though still providing benefits of higher wages and higher standards of living. Moreover, for university

graduates had the biggest chances to get a job at labour market at home (Grabowska-Lusińska and Okólski, 2009). People with basic education are in a different position as they are most likely to be unadjusted to the requirements of labour markets both in Poland and abroad (Kotowska, 2014).

The so-called *Toruń* research provides a picture of the readiness of young people in Poland to leave the country. Chart 2 shows the share of 16 year olds' readiness to live abroad in the future (regardless of the duration of stay) as declared in 2003 (i. e. before Poland joined the EU) and in 2015. It is clear that although the compared periods are twenty years apart, the share of young people intending to emigrate in the future remains unchanged (29-32%). Young people from families high up on the social ladder, with ambitious professional and educational plans who do well at school, are most interested in emigrating.

Table 2: The share of Polish 16 year olds declaring willingness to live abroad in the future, as recorded in 2013 and 2015 versus the socio-economic status of their families of origin

Socio-economic status of the family of origin	2003 N = 4,069	2015 N = 2,392
low	25.7%	23.2%
medium	34.1%	25.9%
high	39.3%	37.0%
Total	32.4%	29.1%

Sources: Domalewski and Mikiewicz, 2004; Domalewski, 2017.

16 year olds from families of a low social status with low educational skills for whom emigration is a huge challenge due to their level of skills, most rarely declare the intent to leave the country in the future.

Such a high share of young people in Poland declaring willingness to leave the country in the future, especially when confronted with emigration intentions of the society in general (Diagnoza Społeczna, 2015) can raise certain reasonable doubts. On the other hand, a closer look at declarations of young people in other countries shows the

declared migration intentions in Poland are not particularly surprising.

In Hungary, as much as half of young people (52%) declares readiness to leave the country on condition that they will be able to combine education and work. At the same time, every third young Hungarian does not consider leaving the country of origin. Similarly to Poland, these are young people from families of low social status and lower cultural capital (Magyar Ifjúság 2012 [Hungarian Youth 2012], 2013, 350). Age is one of the key factors in Hungarian society

regarding the readiness for a short or long term emigration (Sik and Szeidl, 2016, 56).

In Latvia, on the other hand, a country that together with Bulgaria has a particularly high outflow of people, the share of 15-24 year olds intending to leave the country and engage in gainful employment abroad is 24%, the highest among all age groups. In contrast, among young adults (25-34 year olds) this share is 12%. What is more, if we add those who see emigration as likely to become an element of their life in a near future, the share of young Latvian people and young Latvian adults increases to 37% and 22% respectively (The Geographic Mobility..., 2007, 87). Next to the unemployed, potentially most mobile are school students and university students for whom emigration means first of all an opportunity to gain new experiences (therein: 89).

In Bulgaria, in pre-accession period, as well as during real transitional reforms (Domalewski and Szymborski, 2017) a clear decrease in emigration trends could be observed. However, at the turn of the first decade of the 21st century, an increase in emigration trends among young people, especially 20-29 year olds was noted. (Проект на актуализирана "Национална стратегия за младежта" [Updated project of the National Youth Strategy] (2014-2020), 2013). The most likely reason was the global economic crisis, which was also a vital factor encouraging the decision to migrate not only among young people.

Among main motives behind young people's consideration to leave the country in order to take up a gainful employment, a clearly dominant is the willingness to gain new experiences, as indicated by every third young (24 year old or younger) Latvian. At the same time, for 27% emigration is an opportunity to gain new experiences (The Geographic Mobility..., 2007). Similar is true for young Hungarians who, as already mentioned, conditioned their readiness for

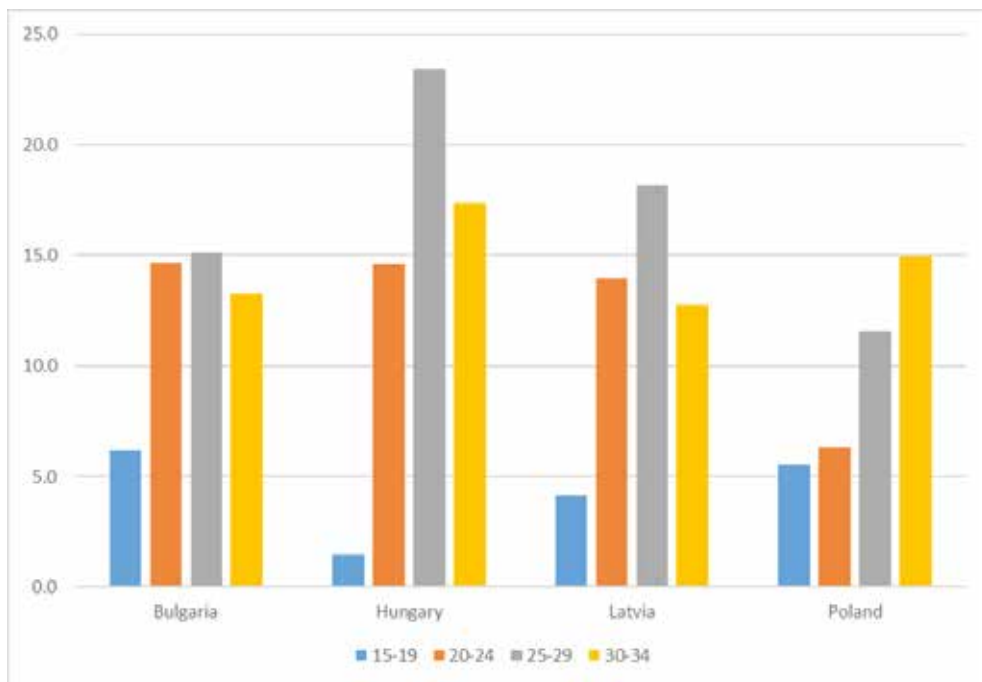
emigration on the ability to combine gainful employment with education (Magyar Ifjúság 2012 [Hungarian Youth 2012], 2013, 350). However, it does not change the fact that against the background for young people's motivation to emigrate there is a crucial factor, namely their work perspectives and living standards. This is a result of the previously discussed young people's susceptibility to the pressure of consumerism.

Emigration as a life experience of young people

Although emigration intentions indicate a potential readiness to emigrate, they cannot form a basis to judge to what extent leaving the country of origin becomes an element of biography of the young generation. It should be emphasised that the data available to a certain degree indicate a convergence of emigration experiences and the plans drawn out by the young people from the selected Central and Eastern European countries.

Picture 4 shows the share of age groups among the total number of emigrants in the compared countries⁵. It is worth pointing out, in the first place, that among the selected Central and Eastern European countries, it is Hungary that is characterised by the highest share – at 57% – of young people (15-24 year olds) in the total number of emigrants. It is characteristic that despite limitations to drawing comparisons, it was Hungary where the readiness for working abroad was the highest, though if combined with the opportunity to learn.

Interestingly, the highest share in the total of Hungarian emigrants are the young adults (25-34 year olds). This category seems to be the most mobile and the decisions to leave the country by this age group are based on their early years (Blaskó and Gödri, 2016, 65).



Source: author's own research based on EUROSTAT figures at <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

Figure 4: The percentage of each age group among the total number of emigrants in 2014

In Bulgaria and Latvia the share of young people and young adults (15-34 year olds) in the total number of emigrants in 2015 was almost 50%. Contrary to Hungary, in these countries the most mobile group were people aged 20-29, which we mentioned when analysing young people's readiness to migrate in relation to Bulgaria especially. In Latvia, the scale of emigration of both the entire population and among the young generation is closely linked to the economic situation in the country. In 2004-2007, the share of young people aged 16-25 in the total number of emigrants was only 16%, in 2008-2012 it tripled up to 48% (McCollum et al., Apsite-Berina, Berzins, Krisjane, 2016, 8). Young people turned up to be watchful observers of the surrounding reality, which translated into their decisions regarding emigration.

Against the background of Bulgaria, Latvia and Hungary, the scale of emigration

of young Poles seems to be relatively small. In the total number of emigrants aged 15-34 it is only 38%. What is more, the mobility of Poles increases with age and probably with acquiring life experience, confrontation with opportunities and limitations of the labour market at home.

In Romania too, majority of emigrants are young people (under 35 years old). The first wave of migration was clearly dominated by males, however recently the sex ratios equalised (Pehoiu and Costache, 2010; Bărbulescu, 2009). The profile of emigrants also changed regarding their level of education. Before the Romania EU-accession, almost half of emigrants were low educated, whereas post-accession the share fall to one third while the percentage of emigrants with higher education rose (Mara, 2012). Once more it turned out that emigration is one of the life paths chosen by young, well-educat-

ed generation ready to abandon their own professional ambitions for the sake of standards of living that are unachievable in their country of origin.

Summary

As no other age group, the young generation experiences tensions resulting from a clash of global patterns of the “appropriate” life offers and abilities to claim them. In our opinion, these opportunities are potentially one of the most important factors determining the choice of “alternative” pathways in life, and for Central and Eastern Europe after the accession to the EU emigration was one of them. We made an otherwise obvious assumption that the larger the dissonance between young people’s ambitions, such as securing a job that would guarantee certain living standards, and the opportunities to fulfil them in their country of origin, the stronger their emigration tendencies are.

The reality turned up to be much more complex. Taking into consideration the affluence of the compared societies and their

labour market, emigration should have become the element of young people’s life strategy’s in Bulgaria much more often than in Hungary or Poland. However, the analyses show that the most mobile young people both potentially and actually are Hungarians, followed by Bulgarians and Latvians (with the two former displaying stronger general emigration tendencies).

The explanation to such somehow surprising findings regarding young people’s emigration experiences in Central and Eastern Europe becomes possible if we look at their intentions to leave the country of origin. For young Hungarians emigration is an option if it allows to combine gainful employment with education. Emigration, therefore, is for them first of all an **opportunity** to gain new life experiences (both educational and professional). By young Bulgarians, Latvians, but also Poles and Romanians emigration is seen more as a **necessity** related to pursuing their own life ambitions otherwise unavailable in their country of origin. Therefore emigration becomes an element of their life strategy, even if it means taking up gainful employment below their qualifications.

Notes

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² More information on this project can be found at <http://youth2015.irwirpan.waw.pl/en/>.

³ In order to achieve the widest comparability of data collected according to the same methodology, we had to reduce the unemployment characteristics to an age category of 15-24 years. People in the 25+ age group were included in the significantly more capable age category, and they were far removed from even the most liberal defi-

nitions of the youth. Data for 2014, which come from another data collection method, namely ILOSTAT, indicating a significant decrease in the proportion of the youngest unemployed people in 2013 for Bulgaria (23.8%), Hungary (20.4%), Latvia (19.6%), Poland (23.9%). There are almost no changes for Romania (24%).

⁴ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2010/438603/IPOL-CULT_ET\(2010\)438603\(SUM01\)_PL.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2010/438603/IPOL-CULT_ET(2010)438603(SUM01)_PL.pdf).

⁵ This analysis does not include Romania as in its case the EUROSTAT database includes only figures on the total number of emigrants and does not provide the division into age groups.

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