

# Welfare Considerations in Migration Decision-Making through a Life-Course Approach: A Qualitative Study of Spanish EU-Movers

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*The welfare aspects of intra-European migration remain an important and controversial topic of academic and political debates. These discussions touch upon the classical ‘welfare magnet’ or ‘welfare tourism’ hypothesis. Transcending the politicised concept of ‘benefit tourism’, our paper examines how welfare-state considerations in relation to migration decisions vary across the life course. Relying on micro-level qualitative research focusing on Spanish intra-EU movers, the paper probes deeper into how individuals perceive welfare systems, analysing the subtle and nuanced meanings of different aspects of the welfare for their migration decisions. We focus more specifically on welfare provisions in terms of health care, compulsory education, child support and other care responsibilities, unemployment and pensions and retirement. Our research indicates that, in studies on the migration–welfare nexus, it is necessary to move beyond the current narrow focus on the welfare magnet hypothesis and to examine how diverse welfare arrangements continuously and dynamically set the context for migration decisions at various stages of an individual’s life. The results of our research show how features of the Spanish welfare system, in comparison to those of potential destination countries, might act as both a trigger and/or a barrier to migration. As such, we get a ‘thicker description’ of the role which welfare might play in shaping individuals’ eventual migratory aspirations and decisions.*

*Keywords: migration aspirations, migration decisions, welfare state, welfare magnet, crisis, Spain*

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## Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between intra-European migration and welfare systems figured prominently in European political and societal debates. These heated discussions are not new and touch upon the classical ‘welfare magnet’ or ‘welfare tourism’ hypothesis. From a rational choice perspective, it is expected that migrants will tend to move to countries with more-generous benefits compared to their home countries. In a context of rising right-wing populism as well as a longstanding narrative on the ‘crisis of the welfare state’, even some groups of EU migrants are now perceived as a potential burden in several European welfare states. EU citizens enjoy cross-border welfare rights when they move to another EU country – either through access to benefits in the country of destination or through the export of benefits from the country of origin (Jorens and van Overmeiren 2009; Martinsen 2005; Verschueren 2009, 2014; see also Regulation (EC) 883/2004 and 987/2009). As a response and to reduce this expected benefit tourism, several EU countries have been introducing a range of social policies to control third-country nationals’ as well as intra-EU migrants’ access to domestic welfare benefits. For example, in the UK, access to most social security benefits and tax credits – including child benefits or child tax credits – is limited to those EEA migrants with the ‘right to reside’; in Belgium, control on welfare use has effectively turned into an instrument with which the Belgian authorities intend to keep undesirable EU migrants out (Lafleur and Stanek 2017a). In addition, in 2014, the German government announced the adoption of ‘New rules to fight “EU benefit tourism”’, implying that EU migrants would no longer be entitled to social welfare benefits after six months of unemployment.<sup>1</sup>

In the EU context, Central and Eastern European migrants are the classical focus of the literature on the links between welfare systems and migration (see, *inter alia*, De Giorgi and Pellizzari 2009; Kahanec and Zimmermann 2010; Kureková 2013); in the public opinion and among policy-makers much less attention has been paid to other European migrants (Barbulescu 2017). Nevertheless, the Southern European countries of Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy were deeply affected by the 2008 global economic crisis and/or subsequent austerity measures; for some time they have had the highest unemployment rates, which is generally considered a major trigger for migration. Indeed, new migration patterns seem to emerge from these Southern European countries towards countries with more-stable economic positions such as Scandinavia, Germany or the United Kingdom (Bygnes 2015; Van Mol and de Valk 2016). Furthermore, the ‘ongoing contraction of freedom of movement rights’, including restrictions in access to domestic welfare benefits mainly portrayed as targeting Eastern European migrants and Roma in particular, have a similar impact on the movement of Southern European migrants (Barbulescu 2017: 27). Our paper contributes to the emerging body of literature on these flows (see, e.g., Izquierdo, Jimeno and Lacuesta 2016; Lafleur and Stanek 2017b) by investigating the role which welfare systems play in these migration patterns. To this end, we examine the micro-level migration decision-making processes of 50 Spanish migrants whom we interviewed in the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal and the United Kingdom in 2016.

We start, in particular, from the premise put forward by de Jong and de Valk (2020: 1776) that ‘the role of welfare arrangements in migration decisions may vary depending on the moment of migration within a person’s life, as individuals’ welfare rights and needs change over the life course’. As these authors indicate, the life course has been largely overlooked in studies on the link between welfare systems and migration decisions. By investigating these links over the life course at the micro-level using qualitative data, we aim to advance the existing literature in three ways.

First, most studies on the link between welfare states and migration decisions in Europe are quantitative. The qualitative studies are still rare (see de Jong and de Valk 2020; Godin 2020; Jolivet, Pereira

2021). The studies generally rely on macro-level indicators – such as government spending on welfare and migration flows – and present mixed findings (see e.g. De Giorgi and Pellizzari 2009; Giuliotti 2014), ‘which suggests that the role of welfare systems in intra-European migration decisions might be more complex than has been theorised so far’ (de Jong and de Valk 2020: 1776). By relying on micro-level qualitative research, this paper aims to advance these debates by probing deeper into how individuals perceive welfare systems and by grasping which aspects of the welfare state they potentially take into account when making migration decisions. Even though welfare arrangements might not be important at the time of making such a decision, migrants may compare elements of welfare states that might become important later in life (de Jong and de Valk 2020). As in their study, we look specifically at welfare provisions in terms of health care, compulsory education, child support and other care responsibilities, unemployment and pensions and retirement. In contrast to other qualitative studies on the subject (e.g. de Jong and de Valk 2020; Ehata and Seeleib-Kaiser 2017) which focused on a single destination country, we focus on a single country of origin and a broader variety of destinations, which allows us to consider which welfare considerations are generally made by intra-European migrants, irrespective of the country of destination.

Second, most existing scholarship looking at welfare and migration focused on non-European migrants (e.g. Brücker *et al.* 2002) or Central and Eastern European migrants (e.g. Kureková 2013). However, as indicated in the previous section, intra-European migration flows have become more diversified in recent years, including, in particular, a larger share of south-north migration within the EEA. In sum, with this paper we aim to advance our knowledge of the links between welfare and migration decision-making and explore the likelihood of the welfare magnet hypothesis in the context of recent Spanish intra-EU migration.

Third, by situating migration decisions within a wider life-course perspective, our paper contributes to current debates in the international migration literature which propose going beyond theoretical approaches that consider migration as a single action rather than a process.

## Background

### *The links between welfare and migration decisions*

The welfare magnet hypothesis (Borjas 1999) postulates that migrants originating in poorer countries will be more likely to move to more-generous welfare states. Most of the empirical evidence concerning this relationship originates from the US (Giuliotti 2014). The existing evidence in Europe, however, generally shows that the effect of welfare generosity is quite small when compared to labour-market conditions (Josifidis, Supic, Pucar and Srdic 2014). If welfare regimes play an important role in migration decisions and migrants make rational choices, as assumed by classic economic theories of international migration (see e.g. de Haas, Castles and Miller 2020; Samers and Collyer 2017), we can expect that Spanish potential migrants will consider different destinations throughout the decision-making process, to ultimately select the country where they can enjoy the highest level of benefits for their particular situation, namely in terms of stage in the life cycle.

However, the welfare magnet hypothesis ignores the fact that welfare systems encompass other aspects than protection against low incomes or the loss thereof, such as access to and the quality of healthcare services or the barriers for non-nationals in accessing formal social protection in other states. Additionally, other factors might also play a role in shaping migrant’s perceptions of the welfare regime

in the destination country. Migrants are not necessarily in possession of complete and perfect information on welfare provisions in destination countries before moving; neither might they be aware of the social rights they might have or lose in their origin country by moving. In addition, migrants' lack of awareness on entitlement and access to rights and benefits (Bruzelius, Chase and Seeleib-Kaiser 2016) places them in a potentially more socially disadvantaged position *vis-à-vis* majority members or those who remain in the origin country. In a recent qualitative study on European migrants in the Netherlands, de Jong and de Valk (2020) concluded that welfare systems affected migration decisions in three regards. First, the welfare system of the country of origin can provide a safety net against the risks of migration. Second, experiences with the welfare system of the receiving country can influence European migrants' decision to stay in the country of destination and, third, welfare dependency can have a retaining effect, making it more unlikely that people will move.

### *Configurations of welfare arrangements across the life course*

International migration research increasingly acknowledges the importance of considering distinct phases of the life course when analysing international migration decisions (see e.g. de Jong and de Valk 2020). Factors such as income and age cleavages shape people's redistributive preferences (Busemeyer, Goerres and Weschle 2009: 207). The life course is also important when considering attitudes towards welfare use (see e.g. Busemeyer *et al.* 2009; Svallfors, Kulin and Schnabel 2012). Younger people, for example, may be more interested in a state's investment in education, while older people have different welfare needs and support a state's spending for pensions (Busemeyer *et al.* 2009). However, how such variation across the life course fits migration decision-making processes remains underexamined.

Spanish migrants are a particularly interesting group to look at in this respect. After all, it has recently been argued that the number of Spanish citizens in other European countries is possibly much higher than it appears in official data. As pointed out by González-Ferrer (2013), official migration statistics from Spain are based on the 'Padrón' municipality population register and Spanish citizens are only deleted from these registers when they officially register with a Spanish consulate abroad. Nevertheless, many Spanish migrants do not do this, since they lose the right to some Spanish benefits by doing so. Indeed, when the official statistics in Spain are compared to those of the UK or Germany, it appears that there are four and seven times more Spanish migrants in these countries than expected on the basis of the Spanish registers (González-Ferrer 2013).

### **Setting the context: old and new Spanish emigration**

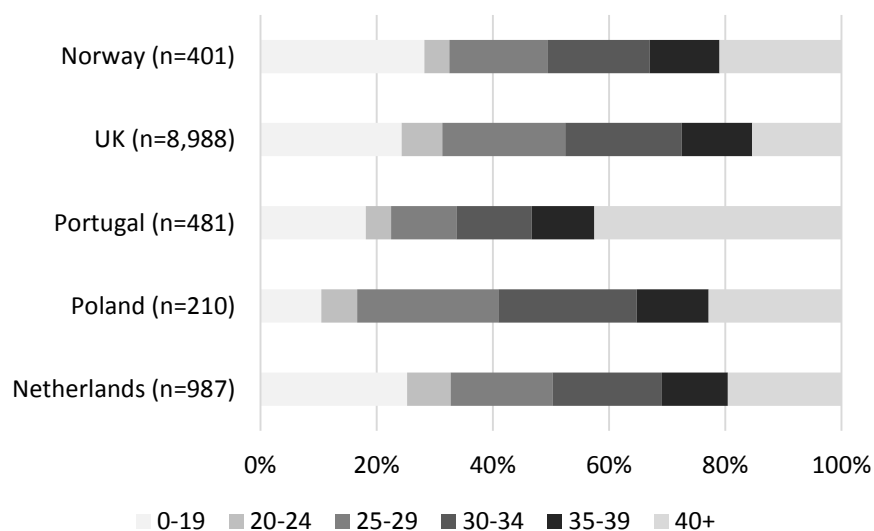
Spain has a significant history of emigration. In the period of the guest-worker programmes after the Second World War up until the oil crisis, Spanish workers were recruited in North-Western European countries such as Germany mainly to be short-term workers in low-skilled professions (Schmidt 1994). Most of these migrants originated from poor agricultural regions characterised by significant levels of unemployment (Bade 2003). During the 1960s, about 170,000 migrants left Spain annually of whom 80 per cent headed towards European countries (Izquierdo *et al.* 2016). It has been estimated that, between 1960 and 1974, more than 3 million Spanish migrants went to other European countries (Valero-Matas, Mediavilla, Valero-Oteo and Coca 2015: 60).

Whereas, since the beginning of the 1990s, the balance in Spain changed from a country of emigration to immigration, in recent years a new outflow of Spanish nationals can be observed and the migration balance has changed yet again from immigration to emigration as a result of the economic crisis (Castles

*et al.* 2014; González-Ferrer 2013; Izquierdo *et al.* 2016). Recent survey evidence suggests that many individuals think about migration in Spain: 48 per cent of Spanish people are said to be willing to move abroad, compared to 30 per cent in Sweden and 35 per cent in Germany (González-Ferrer 2013). In terms of the people who actually move, numbers from the OECD (2013: 23) show, for example, that the annual number of people moving from Spain more than doubled between 2007 and 2011. Although the outflow of migrants is dominated by non-Spanish citizens moving back or onwards (Domingo and Blanes 2015; González-Ferrer 2013; Izquierdo *et al.* 2016), there is also an increase in net migration outflows of the 'local' Spanish population (Izquierdo *et al.* 2016), particularly since 2012 (González-Ferrer 2013). Most Spaniards born in Spain migrate to other European countries or to the USA, the three main countries of destination being the United Kingdom, Germany and France in descending order of importance (González-Ferrer 2013; INE 2016; Izquierdo *et al.* 2016). The majority of the interviewees in our study can be situated within these migration flows, which developed over the last decade. Migration to the UK and Germany might have a significant economic dimension but this is not necessarily the case for migrants to other EU countries. In Poland, Spanish migrants as well as migrants from other Western-European states mainly migrate because of lifestyle factors or relationships with Polish partners (Andrejuk 2017). Many Spanish migrants who work in Poland were previously students at Polish universities.

Public debates on the recent outmigration of the Spanish-born has often focused on young, highly qualified migrants. However, a closer look at the available migration statistics suggests a larger diversity of flows in terms of age cohorts. According to official Spanish registers, in 2016, 24.4 per cent of the migration outflows of Spanish nationals born in Spain were aged over 39 years. There are also cross-country differences – for instance, migrants aged 40+ account for 15.4 per cent of the flows to the UK while, in Portugal, 42.4 per cent of registered Spanish migrants in 2016 were in this age range (Figure 1). This age diversity is likely to be relevant when studying the link between welfare systems and migration due to changing welfare needs throughout the life course – we take this variety into account in our analysis.

**Figure 1. Outmigration flows from Spain in 2016**



Source: INE (2017).

## Data and methods

Our analysis draws on semi-structured interviews collected between March and December 2016 for the Mobile Welfare project – a comparative study which aimed to improve the theorisation of the role of welfare provision in migration aspirations and decisions. The study targeted people with different migration experiences: some never migrated, others migrated and returned and others were living abroad. The interviews with the migrants were conducted in five EU member states (The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the UK), Norway and Turkey, with different welfare needs according to the migrants' position in the life course and taking into account the macro-, meso- and micro-level context, from both the origin and the destination perspective. The interviews set out to gather information on the role of different social-protection providers in people's mobility and immobility aspirations and decisions, mainly the formal welfare state, the private sector and personal/social networks. We explored both the perceptions and the use of welfare arrangements in the countries of origin and destination and their transnational dimension. The interviewees were asked explicitly about various areas of welfare: we focused on people's arrangements in a variety of domains such as healthcare, education and childcare, the loss of income due to retirement or unemployment and the care of the elderly. The qualitative approach allowed us to examine the subjective perspectives of individuals, explaining more comprehensively the significance of the various dimensions of welfare, personal accounts of welfare accessibility and nuanced approaches to formal/informal elements of welfare throughout the life course. The interview guide was structured in three main parts, inquiring about individuals' life before migration took place (if applicable), their post-migration personal experiences and those with the welfare systems in the country of origin and destination and, finally, their future perspectives. Our aim was to achieve a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of the migrants' emotions and the meanings behind their actions. Interviewees had the opportunity to speak freely about their understanding of welfare and interpretation of their actions, thus allowing the researchers to avoid rigid categorisations prior to collecting the empirical material.

In this article we focus on Spanish migrants in urban areas in the Netherlands (the Randstad area), Norway (Oslo), Portugal (the Lisbon Metropolitan Area), Poland (the Warsaw area) and the UK (London and the commuting area, in particular Oxford). The selection of countries was made in order to cover a plurality of types of welfare systems (Esping-Andersen 1990; Moreno 2013; Moreno and Sarasa 1992). This allows us to uncover how differences between welfare systems might influence migration processes as well as the role which welfare considerations play in migration processes, irrespective of the destination country. The latter is the focus of our paper. The Netherlands can be classified as a *conservative-corporatist welfare state*, providing support to families when they lack the necessary resources to guarantee their well-being. Norway is classified as a *social-democratic welfare state* that promotes economic solidarity independent of individual contributions. The UK is considered a *liberal welfare state* in this classification, characterised by reduced benefits to individuals and an increased reliance of people on the market and employment. Finally, Spain and Portugal are characterised as having a 'mid-way' or mixed system, with some elements of the corporative system, strong family solidarity and the role of property acquisition as social protection. Research indicates that welfare regimes in post-communist countries are different to those in Western Europe and require addition to Esping-Andersen's typology (Fenger 2007). Poland, like other post-communist EU member states, is defined as a country of 'post-communist European type'. While it resembles the welfare type of the post-USSR states, its welfare regime is more egalitarian than in post-Soviet republics and the level of social well-being is higher than in Eastern Europe (Fenger 2007: 24–25).

Within the research localities, the selection of Spanish interviewees was done through snowball sampling methods, with multiple entry points in order to ensure coverage of the different participant categories (via churches, migrant organisations, embassies, personal and professional networks and *Facebook* groups of Spaniards living abroad such as *Espanoles en Londres*, *Espanoles en Lisboa* or *Catalans a Londres*). The diversity of entry points ensured a comprehensive coverage of profiles in terms of socio-economic background. This is important, 'as the literature on migration and welfare often expects welfare to be more important to the lower-educated' (de Jong and de Valk 2020: 1780). Besides the migration experience, our sampling targeted men and women who were active in the labour market – employed or unemployed – or who were active in the past. Additionally, we took into account the different life-transition events diversifying the sample in terms of sex, age, family and occupational situation. The literature indicates that attitudes towards welfare (including welfare spending) are affected by an individual's position in the social structure, stage in the life cycle and age (Busemeyer *et al.* 2009; Kulin and Svallfors 2011; Svallfors *et al.* 2012). The diversity of our sample can be summed up in a heuristic classification, with three types of interviewee according to their life stage at the time of the interview (see Figure 2): first, younger people with relatively few years' activity in the labour market and without children; second, interviewees with children under 15; and, third, older interviewees for whom strategies against the loss of income due to retirement could be more relevant than for participants in the other two groups.

**Figure 2. Profile selection criteria for interviews**

	Age	Transition period	Family situation
<b>Profile 1 (P1)</b>	18–35	From studies to working life (first years of working experience)	No children
<b>Profile 2 (P2)</b>	25–54	Recent family formation or parenthood	Moving together with their partner, with plans of having children or with at least one child (up to 14 years)
<b>Profile 3 (P3)</b>	55 or more	From working life towards retirement or retired	Diverse situations

The stage in the life course at the time of migration might differ from that at the time of the interview. For instance, those who already had children when interviewed (Profile 2) might have migrated before they had any family plans. Likewise, young migrants without children (Profile 1) might have migrated with the idea of having children soon. Finally, those aged 55 or more (Profile 3) could have migrated at a younger age after their studies. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face although four were conducted via Skype. They were all transcribed into English and coded using NVivo. This article analyses 50 interviews: 12 in the Netherlands (NL) (P1, P2, P3), 8 in Norway (NO) (P1, P2), 14 in the UK (P1, P2, P3), 8 in Poland (PL) (P1, P2) and 8 in Portugal (PL) (P1, P2). Drawing on these empirical data, in the next section we analyse whether differences in the European welfare systems shaped our interviewees' aspirations and decisions to migrate. Simultaneously, we look at the impact of age and life stage on the link between welfare and migration decisions.

When conducting the empirical research, we observed the ethical standards required from projects involving vulnerable groups. The interviewees were notified about the aims of the project and the institutions involved. All interviewed individuals gave their informed consent and their participation was voluntary. The interviews were anonymised before the analysis and no personal data were disclosed in the article.

### **Welfare in migration decision-making: differences across the life cycle**

As a central aim of this paper is to analyse how welfare-state considerations may be played out differently in the decision to migrate or to remain in the country of emigration across the life course, we organised this section according to the life phase of our interviewees: whether young people, family life and older individuals (approaching retirement or retired). For each stage of the life cycle, we systematically examine the narratives of our interviewees to identify whether and how they took welfare considerations into account throughout their migration process (before departure and upon arrival) in the different domains (unemployment, healthcare, education, retirement), including the origin as well as the destination countries.

#### *Young people's migration aspirations and decisions*

When analysing the interviews with young Spanish adults in the various destination countries, differences between welfare systems did not appear to play a crucial role in their motivations for leaving Spain. Instead, some of them clearly suggest that finding a job, quality of life, experience and, more recently, the economic crisis were primary motives for relocating to a different country. Many interviewees stated that they were unhappy with the situation in Spain – some of them making explicit reference to the crisis – and therefore searched for a job abroad:

*Well, actually, I don't know if you know but the situation is completely a mess, like a big drama. Because all my friends (...) all of them are now outside of Spain. (...) Eh, we don't have the opportunity to work. (...) It's completely..., it's a big drama. Because all my friends – one in Australia, my cousin lives in Frankfurt, because we don't have opportunities. I think we have a good education – at university – but the problem is, we finish our studies and say 'OK, I want to find a job' but we don't manage to (Profile 1, NL-01).*

The intra-EU mobility policies also enforce, to some extent, a self-selection of potential migrants. The mobile youth are often students and graduates whose first mobility experiences include university exchange programmes in another EU country. These resourceful and ambitious individuals are more prone to take advantage of their cultural capital and seek work experience, rather than remaining unemployed and looking for social benefits. Even in the process of family-motivated migration, they take into account the prospects of improving their situation on the labour market:

*South Spain, I studied philology there. When I finished, I decided to ask for Erasmus abroad and went to Greece. In Greece I met a person who is my husband today, he is Polish. So after this Erasmus I went back to Spain; I looked for a job there for a couple of years and I didn't find anything interesting there. So, after three years of being together but not together I decided to move to Poland. And that was 2007, the beginning. So I have been here for eight years (Profile 2, PL-04).*



Although our interviewees did not explicitly indicate that welfare systems had a determinant role in their decision-making process to migrate or not, their narratives suggest that certain aspects of the welfare system of receiving states might have been taken into consideration. The following quote, for example, illustrates how a Spanish interviewee who moved to the United Kingdom had also considered moving to Northern Europe, making particular reference to certain elements of Nordic welfare systems:

*Because I think, in Nordic countries, you can have a decent quality of life. I mean, there's a good health service, social benefits, it's an easy way of living, there are reasonable distances between cities, where you can... wages are quite high as are living costs... Even though you can do things, you can have a social life. London's more complicated but at the same time it provides more job offers in my professional sector. There are more... All international pharmaceutical companies have either their European headquarters or a subsidiary in London. All of them. If you want to be someone within the pharma world you have to be in London (Profile 1, UK-64).*

Although our young Spanish interviewees might have had some vague ideas about the welfare system in their destination country before moving, most of them indicated that they did not explicitly search for information on welfare-state arrangements before migrating. Most of them moved first and then checked how things should be organised. The fact that they did not search for information about welfare arrangements prior to departure might be related to the fact that the younger generations are much more accustomed to travelling and spending short periods abroad, which they relate to lesser concerns about gathering information and preparing the move. As Barbulescu (2017: 27) indicated, 'Unlike Central and Eastern Europeans, young Spaniards (...) have been socialized in a Europe in which mobility is free'. Because of their experience of this freedom of movement in the EU, they probably also expect welfare arrangements in various EU countries to be similar and that they would have easy access to them. However, in the cases where information on welfare is gathered *before* migration, our data also suggest that it is not because people are informed about the welfare system before departure that they choose to rely on it. The next quote indicates that the person had a good knowledge of the welfare system in the UK before migrating. He did quite a lot of research and got the information through the people who were already living in London (friends and friends of friends). He also relied quite intensively on the Internet to find information about the British welfare system. However, while having the knowledge can provide a feeling of economic security when making the decision to migrate, it does not mean that migrants rely on it:

*Well, I knew that, as a European citizen, I had access to social security and a free health service, that there was a developed benefits system and that, even without having worked before in England, you could claim unemployment benefits... which I didn't do even though I know there's a lot of foreign people doing it. (...) So I knew I could rely on this, as well as on Spanish unemployment benefit, which I could transfer. Taking into account all these things, I decided that I could count on economic security even if I couldn't find a job (Profile 1, UK-64).*

Our data suggest that these young adults also generally chose their destination country because of previous travel and social networks, such as friends and family members who were living there, rather than for welfare-related factors. Furthermore, our data also illustrate the ways in which the origin country's welfare regime remains important throughout the migration process in domains such as unemployment benefit

or healthcare. Migrants strategically maintain access to the social protection offered in the origin country even after migration:

*I was getting the unemployment subsidy from Spain and you are not allowed to leave the country. I registered here at the City Town Hall but obviously, they are not going to get in touch with the Spanish government. Spain can only know once you register yourself at the Embassy. I didn't see any advantages [in doing so] (Profile 1, NL-11).*

In terms of healthcare, many of our interviewees stated that, once they were acknowledged by the receiving country's healthcare system, they considered the Spanish system to be better. Some of them appreciated the advantages of the host country's healthcare but preferred to keep in touch with the Spanish system for reasons of continuity of medical treatment. As a result, many of these young adults seemed to adopt a strategy of 'welfare bricolage' (Philimore *et al.* 2015, 2021): they combine private with public healthcare and regularly travel back and forth to Spain for medical care, instead of relying exclusively on the receiving country's healthcare system.

Altogether, this suggests that welfare in the destination country does not function as a magnet in the migration projects of young Spaniards. Quite the contrary and in line with the findings of de Jong and de Valk (2020), some migrants are actually reluctant to give up their welfare entitlements in the country of origin. As such, welfare arrangements do seem to play a role in their migration trajectory. Even though they tend to define their decisions in terms of personal agency and the freedom from constraints, our results particularly suggest that access to welfare, both in the host and the home countries, played an important role in the migration decisions and experiences of our young adult interviewees.

#### *Migration at the stage of family formation*

We also observe that, for our Spanish migrant interviewees who are at the stage of family formation or have children younger than 15 years old, welfare arrangements generally did not seem to play a major role in their migration decisions and considerations. Most of the people we interviewed with this profile moved for love and/or family reasons, which often also intersected with professional considerations.

Compared to the first profile, however, the comparisons which migrants in a phase of family formation make between welfare systems in the countries of origin and of destination were much more salient during the interviews. Several interviewees indicated, for example, that they compared the solutions available in both countries in terms of childcare and child benefits:

#### ***Do you use child benefits in Poland like 500+?***

Yes.

#### ***What is your opinion about it? Is it positive solution?***

*Yes. You have some money for the children. In Spain they are furious because there was 3,000 euros for each child and then there was the crisis and they could not give this support but here it is possible to have this economic help and it's super (Profile 2, PL-001).*

In the decision-making process, the impact of migration on opportunities for accessing informal childcare arrangements is also taken into account, as in the case of this male engineer with a 3-year-old daughter:

*Well, we know that there are pros and cons in each place (...) we knew that having a family here would be more complicated as we would have to do all the work without family help or resources for all of this (Profile 2, UK-81).*

Furthermore, for some of our interviewees, education also played a role. This was especially the case for those who migrated to Norway and Poland. For example, one of our interviewees (Profile 2, NO-57) migrated to Norway mainly to provide his son with the type of education that he considered in Spain to be only accessible in the private sector. Nevertheless, our Spanish interviewees in Norway did not consider the Norwegian education system to be better than the Spanish one. For instance, one of our interviewees migrated alone while his two daughters stayed in Spain with his ex-wife, as they preferred the Spanish education system. However, he now wants to bring his daughters to Norway because they will learn what it means to live in a different country (to be a migrant) and they will practice foreign languages: 'When they finish middle school, they'll be able to speak four languages fluently; for me it opens their doors to any job (M-P2-SP-NO-49). This again suggests that welfare arrangements played a subtle role in structuring the migration decisions and experiences of our interviewees.

Those who have children – or who migrated with the idea of having them soon – also seemed to have a greater inclination, compared to the younger movers, to check how the healthcare system works in the destination country. Welfare factors also seemed to be taken into account in the decision-making process about staying after emigration:

*After the interviews and such, he [the partner] stipulated what he wanted and this included an insurance policy. We had, in China with the American company, a health insurance policy; to go to the international hospital, it was needed. For us this was important, without knowing that it was going to be so useful to us (Profile 2, PT-03).*

After starting a family, migrants logically need to rely more on social assistance. This includes both assistance from the state (e.g. childcare benefits) as well as informal welfare arrangements (e.g. help with childcare duties). In comparison to younger adults, parents more actively engage with welfare systems, seeking various forms of help, such as child benefits or good education services. Their transnational lives allow them to make sophisticated and nuanced comparisons of the quality of welfare in the different countries. Their narratives enable us to observe not only the objective but also the subjective character of the role of welfare systems in migration at various stages of life: those interviewees with families were more likely to recognise their welfare needs and to actively seek and expect help from their social and institutional environment.

In sum, our results suggest that an interest in and knowledge of particular aspects of welfare systems might be associated with the specific life stage of an individual. Migrants who had families seemed to be the most interested in education and welfare arrangements for their children and in parenthood as well as healthcare. Again, it is important to note that, because of their specific life stage, they were interested in *particular* aspects of welfare systems: most of the participants at this stage were still unaware of how to organise their pension.

*Older individuals: approaching retirement and retired*

Before discussing the retirement strategies of Spanish migrants, we should first mention a limitation of our research. In contrast to the other two groups, we only interviewed older migrants in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. On the other hand, as Poland is a new immigration country, it attracts mostly young individuals; the population of older migrants is practically non-existent. As with the other two younger groups, our older interviewees did not indicate that they gave a prominent role to welfare arrangements when making migration decisions. Love migration occurred in this group as well, particularly when the migrants' partner already had children as it was then logical to move where they were based. Furthermore, our data suggest that the economic crisis also informed the migration decision of some of our interviewees who were almost at the end of their careers; for some, migration was the only way perceived to cope with unemployment. However, migration is also seen as a way to make a drastic change in life or as an opportunity for a new adventure. It is then considered a positive experience, a chance to discover a new place:

*I finished my time on this newspaper – it's the hardest moment of the crisis in Spain, which affects advertising... 2011... approximately at the end, I left everything and I became unemployed... you earn 1,200 euros and you have to pay the rent for a flat plus your children's costs. In 2012... 2012 and part of 2013... in 2013, I even went to Mallorca in June to work in whatever I could and I didn't manage it... but I went around all the most touristic zones asking for a job in anything – as a waiter, which would be the easiest, or anything else, but I didn't find anything. My daughter has a boyfriend who knows someone here and who is working and then I said 'Well' and why not, it was Oxford and Oxford for me was not only migrating, it was Oxford! (Profile 3, UK-78).*

This suggests once again that most of the interviewed Spanish migrants were driven abroad by motives other than welfare considerations. Just as in the other groups, however, the older interviewees indicated that they were interested in particular dimensions of the welfare system. For example, they were logically much more aware of how the pension system worked and to what pension they were entitled.

*So, actually my frustration is that I am barely accruing any pension – that is different in Spain, very different in Spain. You have a job and you make 600 or 500 or 1,000 a month, then you are entitled to pension on that 1,000. Here in the Netherlands it is not like that. I have the right to a pension but let's say that [uhm]... the 'old age pension' is up to 750 and I make 1,000, then I am only building a pension for the 250 – that is really very little (Profile 3, NL-19).*

However, if they were sometimes more aware than the other two groups about the details of their pension and transferability rights after migration, they were not necessarily aware of the pension system in the destination country *before* migrating. At the time of migration, having sorted a secure source of income before migrating appeared to be more important – their more immediate needs to secure enough financial resources to provide for their children's education or to pay the mortgage of their property in Spain were more important than any future pension arrangements. The welfare benefits of the sending country may be helpful in making it through the first phase of staying abroad.

*I quit my job in April... [in order] to receive the job-seeker's allowance [in Spain] some months in the summer period... meanwhile I could look for a job [in England] ... and she [the daughter] goes to London in September... and me, I move to wherever I find a job (Profile 3, UK-65).*

Instead of relying on the welfare system to make the move with an income, the interviewee and her husband considered two countries of destination simultaneously and finally moved to the one that offered the more-straightforward way to move with a job. The first option was Norway, where the husband could work as a bus driver. However, before migrating, he needed to learn a basic level of Norwegian and pass a language exam, which would take him three or four months. Instead, they decided to move to London, where the couple had Spanish friends; they therefore knew the city because they had been there as tourists and the husband could start working almost immediately in a job that one friend had arranged for him. They did not consider the differences between the British and the Norwegian welfare systems.

Compared to our two other groups, interviewees who migrated at an age closer to retirement clearly more often balanced the advantages and inconveniences of staying in the UK until – or returning to Spain before – the age of retirement. We identified three main topics that they considered in their ongoing decision-making: first, the cost of living and the quality of life that they would have in each country; second, the advantages of earning part of their pension in pounds sterling which, at the time of our study, was still somewhat higher than the euro; and, third, the extent to which they could rely on the Spanish pension system. As one interviewee indicated, for example:

*Let's be sincere here. I think nobody is going to have pensions in Spain in 20 years. If they get it, it'll be half of what they have saved. I haven't said it – the Minister of the Economy said it, three days ago. The fund has ended – there isn't one anymore, they've had to use it. Here I am saving from my wages each week, little by little. I know I can transfer from there, the same as with the P60 when you go to Spain, although I don't know what it is exactly (Profile 3, UK-79).*

Altogether, this illustrates once again the role that welfare systems can play in migration decisions – in this case the decision to return or to stay in the country of destination. For some interviewees, the uncertainty regarding the possibility of securing themselves an income upon retirement has increased following the EU referendum in the UK and the lack of clarity on the consequences of Brexit in the transferability rights of EU migrants (up until today). So here, too, it seems that their specific life stage influences their interest in different welfare aspects and, particularly, improves their knowledge in specific domains that are relevant for people in this life phase. This is especially the case for retirement benefits.

Our research also suggests that the various receiving states experience differentiated challenges with regards to migrants and welfare. The relatively 'new' immigration countries such as Poland do not have large numbers of older migrants and therefore the political focus may be on other aspects of welfare and migration such as childcare support. In the case of Western European countries, where many migrants experience the transition from working life to retirement, the problems of policy-building and responses seem different and more attention if given to the issue of transferability of pensions schemes.

## **Conclusion**

The link between migration and welfare features on both the political and the scientific agenda. Nevertheless, our current knowledge of the role which the different welfare arrangements between countries

might play on migration decisions over the life course remains quite limited. Existing research largely adopted a quantitative approach, linking the direction of migration flows to welfare-state indicators. These studies generally find little evidence for the welfare magnet hypothesis. Qualitative approaches, however, are rarely adopted in the literature. This is unfortunate as such an approach allows us to gain a more in-depth understanding of the subtle and eventually secondary role which welfare considerations might play in migration decisions. In this paper, we have provided one such more-nuanced understanding. We (re)examined the links between migration and welfare through a life-course perspective centred on individual micro-level narratives, focusing on the experiences of Spanish migrants who moved to the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal and the United Kingdom. We were particularly interested in unpacking the relationship between migration decision-making and welfare considerations, taking into account the welfare arrangements both in potential destination countries and in the origin country to see whether there is variation across the life course. Our expectation was that, depending on the specific life stage at which a migrant is situated, some welfare arrangements might be more relevant and/or important than others throughout the migration process. Our contribution indeed suggests that welfare systems can play a quite subtle role in migration decision-making processes as well as the importance of considering the life phase in which a migrant is situated when studying the links between welfare and migration. Based on our analysis, we draw the following conclusions.

First, our findings provide little evidence for the welfare magnet hypothesis among Spanish intra-EU movers, regardless of the stage in the life cycle. There was only one interviewee who explicitly referred to welfare arrangements as a primary motivation for choosing a particular destination. Second, although welfare arrangements do not seem to play a major role in the decisions of our interviewees to leave the country of origin, they do contribute to structuring the migration process. Interviewees either in the phase of family formation, parenting, or retirement seemed to be more likely to consider education, healthcare or pensions in their migration decisions. In later life phases, it appears that Spanish intra-EU movers are more interested in getting information on what will happen in terms of welfare after they move or if they decide to return to Spain, in order to secure access for themselves and their families. Among the younger interviewees, welfare considerations were much less present in their narratives, although they sometimes referred to them indirectly – such as when they report how they can sometimes profit from welfare arrangements in both the country of origin and of destination. Third, the decision to stay in the host country may become easier when there is the possibility of using the welfare systems of various countries simultaneously. The Spanish migrants we interviewed often seemed to be reluctant to rely entirely on the welfare regime of the destination country and to lose access to the welfare state in their country of origin. Instead, our findings clearly indicate that many Spanish migrants combine formal and informal welfare arrangements, in both the destination and the origin country. Such practices of transnational ‘welfare bricolage’ seem to be widespread among our Spanish migrant interviewees. This finding also indicates that merely focusing on the destination country’s formal welfare-state arrangements is not sufficient for understanding the link between welfare and migration. Our findings show that it is more fruitful to focus on both formal and informal arrangements, including the countries of origin and of destination.

The excessive emphasis on benefit tourism in migration studies in recent years has distracted researchers from examining the other, more-nuanced ways and mechanisms which connect the migration process and welfare arrangements. Our research documents self-reported motivations (internal explanations, personal narratives and interpretations of the significance of welfare). It examines how migrants describe migration decisions in their own words and the role that welfare played in those decisions. Migrants generally take some welfare factors into account in their migration decisions but

they are not equally cognizant of this fact at the various life stages. Our examination of migrants' subjective narratives about welfare, the quality of life defined as 'easy way of living' and the security suggests that younger migrants are less likely to report how the welfare system structures their migration trajectory. Migrants with families and retired migrants are more aware of how formal and informal welfare shapes their opportunities and trajectories. This does not mean that migrants make their decisions solely on the basis of available state benefits. It instead shows that migrants take a variety of elements into consideration when making migration decisions.

In studies of the migration–welfare nexus, the political and academic overemphasis on migrants who take advantage of the financial benefits of the host state shifted the necessary attention away from the important broader welfare considerations of migrating individuals. In contrast to heated debates in some EU countries about European migrants being attracted by generous formal welfare arrangements, we found little evidence for the classical welfare magnet hypothesis for the case of Spanish intra-EU movers. Welfare arrangements certainly do not figure among their primary motivations for moving across Europe. Nevertheless, welfare arrangements clearly matter for the whole migration process, even in the case of employable, highly skilled and entrepreneurial individuals. Since welfare is significant for migrants at various stages of life, (restricted) access to specific arrangements and earlier experiences with another welfare system may greatly contribute to the strategies of Spanish intra-EU movers. Our research proves that it is essential to study the welfare aspects of migration in an in-depth manner because they set the context for the mobility process, even in the case of migrants who are far from 'benefit shopping' and who move for reasons other than the search for welfare benefits.


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No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28955443> (accessed: 10 December 2021).

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