

‘In Hungary, Everything Is Better’ – Recently Arrived Older German Migrants’ Narratives about Relocating to Rural Hungary

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International retirement migration (IRM) is a constantly diversifying phenomenon, in which new concepts and geographies are emerging and new social groups are becoming involved. In this paper, we intend to fill a research gap in terms of the geographical scope of IRM by focusing on Hungary as a host country for a growing number of older migrants from Western European countries. The paper focuses, in particular, on older German citizens settled in rural Hungary, who constitute the largest group of Western European migrants illustrated both by statistical data and empirical evidence. Based on semi-structured interviews conducted with German migrants over 50 years of age living in small peripheral villages, we show how they explain and justify their decision to relocate to Hungary. Based on this empirical evidence, we demonstrate the complex and changing nexus of economic, lifestyle-oriented, political and ideological motivations shaping the decision to migrate. While, regardless of the period of migration, economic and lifestyle-oriented considerations can be identified as determining factors in migration decisions, the narratives of those German citizens aged over 50 who have relocated since the mid-2010s emphasise their dissatisfaction with the political and social circumstances in their home country as a primary incentive to migrate and portraying Hungary as an attractive destination in political and ideological terms.

Keywords: international retirement migration, lifestyle migration, geoarbitrage, political and ideological motivations of migration, relative status loss

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Introduction

International retirement migration (IRM) has been a theoretically discussed and an empirically well-documented social phenomenon in the recent decades. Globalisation, the rise of mass tourism, increases in wealth and the number of years spent in retirement all contribute to the greater willingness of older adults to relocate and start a new life in another country. IRM is closely related to the theoretical framework of lifestyle migration, which focuses on the individual lifestyle choices of relatively affluent migrants (Benson 2010; Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2016). However, current research shows that IRM is a constantly diversifying phenomenon, where new aspects are emerging – including new geographies, motivations and timing – and new social groups are becoming involved in this type of migration (King, Cela and Fokkema 2021). Some traditional destinations have become saturated by lifestyle and retirement migrants and new frontiers for IRM are opened up (King, Cela, Morettini and Fokkema 2019) at both European and global levels. It is not just the retired who are involved in older people's international migration; some approaching retirement also move abroad to where they intend to live until and after reaching their retirement age (Bolzman, Fokkema, Guissé and van Dalen 2021; Green 2014). Increasingly, more older adults with a lower social status and who experience economic precarity choose migration as a coping strategy (Botterill 2017; de Jong 2022; Iorio 2020; Toyota 2022).

Based on empirical evidence consisting of semi-structured interviews with German migrants over 50 years of age, the aim of this paper is to contribute to IRM scholarship by widening its geographical and thematic scope. On the one hand, we demonstrate that Hungary has become an increasingly attractive destination for West-European, predominantly German, older citizens; on the other, we attempt to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex and changing nexus of lifestyle-related, economic and political, ideological motivations for migration. By answering the question of why they migrated to rural Hungary, the focus of this paper is on how they explain and justify their decision to migrate. Our empirical results support both the relevance of lifestyle migration and of geoarbitrage (Hayes 2014) as an analytical framework of IRM. Our contribution is to highlight the relevance of political and ideological motivations for migration in the narratives of those German migrants 50+ who have recently relocated to small peripheral villages in Hungary. Our results suggest that processes such as the immigration of third-country citizens and the unexpected crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russo-Ukraine war and their lived or feared consequences, as well as the growing dissatisfaction with public policies aimed at addressing these challenges, might all shape people's motivations to migrate and fuel migration to Hungary. Thus, our empirical evidence from Hungary draws attention to the growing importance of political and ideological considerations in how recently arrived migrants explain and justify their migration decisions, a phenomenon thus far under-discussed in the literature on IRM.

The article starts with a theoretical framework, where we describe current trends and ongoing debates on IRM and related research areas. Next, we introduce Hungary as a destination country for older German citizens, highlighting their increasing number and spatial distribution in Hungary. We then present the methodology, reflecting on the field sites and some social characteristics of the interviewees. The empirical results are interpreted in four sections, which detail these older migrants' perceptions and interpretation of 1) immigration to Germany, perceived as a physical and cultural threat; 2) the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, interpreted as a lack of political and public representation and as a restriction of individual autonomy; and 3) the social injustice resulting in the crises of livelihoods. Finally, we show how recently arrived German migrants aged 50+ portray the receiving country compared to the home country, discussing the importance of values, meanings and imaginations attached to Hungary within the narratives on migration. The subsequent discussion

embeds our empirical results in a broader context and interprets them in the light of the literature. In the conclusion we briefly summarise the main findings and the contribution of our research to the understanding of the complex and changing phenomenon which is IRM.

Theoretical and conceptual framework of IRM

The early literature on IRM predominantly focused on the population and migration aspects of the phenomenon, while ageing has increasingly come to the fore (King, Warnes and Williams 1998). In the early 2000s, retirement migration was already associated with transnational lifestyle and the privileged position of migrants (Gustafson 2001). This idea has been elaborated by Benson and O'Reilly (2009: 609), who defined lifestyle migrants as 'relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life'.

Lifestyle migration is applied as an analytical and conceptual framework rather than a coherent theory – 'a lens rather than a box' (Benson and O'Reilly 2016: 25) – within the international migration literature (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2016; Korpela 2020). Lifestyle migration as a 'lens' focuses on subjective aspects of migration and migrants' self-narratives, on how imaginations and meanings of other places shape one's decision to relocate and how people then build up a new way of life in a different country (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Hayes 2021). Other authors have pointed out the importance of the relationality of lifestyle mobility (Botterill 2017; Torkington 2012) and emphasise that multi-layered hierarchies, societal structures and geographical and political positions shape this type of migration (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Korpela 2020; Ormond and Toyota 2017).

According to Benson and O'Reilly's (2009) frequently cited definition, lifestyle migrants aim to achieve a better way of life through residential mobility. Their purpose is to attain a slower pace of life, better climate conditions and idyllic rural spaces where the cost of living is relatively lower, there is a feeling of security and a sense of community spirit. While a number of qualitative case studies have since been published, a debate has been articulated on the conceptualisation of lifestyle migration. Huete, Mantecón and Estévez (2013: 337) criticised the lack of a precise definition of 'relatively affluent' people and raised the point that labour and lifestyle migrants often share similarities (including motivations), which would justify observing the two forms of residential behaviour 'as parts of the same continuum of mobility types'.

This critique indicates that relative privilege and affluence do not equate to a lack of economic constraints (Huete *et al.* 2013). A literature review containing 90 articles on international retirement migration revealed that the third-most-important motivation of retired migrants was the lower living costs in the host country (Savaş, Spaan, Henkens, Kalmijn and van Dalen 2023). This means that at least some older adults decide upon migration to lower-income countries in order to maintain or enhance their socio-economic status. Repetti, Phillipson and Calasanti (2018) emphasised how economic pressures impact on the choices of Northern European retirees seeking to relocate to Mediterranean countries. In this context the authors identify IRM as a type of economic migration. In a similar way, Hayes (2015) and Hayes and Pérez-Gañán (2016) referred to many North American retired migrants who relocated to Ecuador due to economic motivations as 'economic amenity migrants – migrants whose relocation is shaped by a search for a lower cost of living, sometimes under conditions of financial duress' (Hayes 2015: 274). Benson and Osbaldiston (2016) argued that privilege is produced by social structures. Therefore, power asymmetries and economic and material conditions should be taken into account when talking about the 'free choices' of individuals. In accordance with Korpela (2014), they concluded that social and economic constraints facilitate, limit and shape migrants' choices and actions.

Based on his research evidence Hayes (2014, 2015, 2021) introduced the concept of geographical arbitrage, a critical political geographical framework within IRM studies. In Hayes' approach, in north-south international retirement migration, retirees who sold their labour in high-cost labour markets transfer their pensions, savings and daily expenses to low-cost locations, where they can finance an accommodation and lifestyle that they could not afford from their pensions or savings in their home countries. Thus, international retirement migration is 'the lifestyle equivalent of financial arbitrage or trading which seeks to benefit from price differentials in different markets' (Hayes 2014: 10). Through their relocation, migrants take advantage of 'individual arbitrage opportunities' constituted by global structural hierarchies and inequalities, while migrants' lost former economic and social statuses and their relative vulnerability in the home country are transformed into a relative privilege and affluence in the receiving country (Hayes 2015). However, while the purchasing power of retired migrants becomes higher and their socio-economic status might increase after relocation due to lower costs of living (Bender, Hollstein and Schweppe 2018; Hayes 2014, 2015; Iorio 2020; King *et al.* 2019; Repetti *et al.* 2018), relative privilege and social vulnerability might coexist (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Botterill 2017). Ormond and Toyota (2017) addressed economic and care-related vulnerabilities of retired migrants. Recent empirical evidence has indicated the growing presence of economically vulnerable groups participating in IRM (Botterill 2017; Iorio 2020; King *et al.* 2021; Toyota 2022).

Some scholars draw attention to the fact that the concept of 'retirement' became more flexible (King *et al.* 2021). In its narrowest meaning, IRM implies migration at or after retirement; however, more and more people move abroad before reaching retirement age, with the subsequent retirement in mind, while others may have taken early retirement (Bolzman *et al.* 2021). In order to grasp this flexibility in terms of time of migration, Bolzman *et al.* (2021) introduced the term international near-retirement or retired migrants (INRRM), while others proposed to use the term 'later-life' migrants (Green 2014; Warnes and Williams 2006). However, in this paper we use the established term of IRM, keeping in mind the flexible timing of older people's migration.

IRM is also an increasing diversifying phenomenon in terms of geographies (King *et al.* 2021; Ormond and Toyota 2017). While case studies on heliotropic migration are well documented in both the European (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Casado-Díaz 2006; Gustafson 2001; Lundström 2014) and the US contexts (Matysiak 2022), rural destinations (Benson 2010; Stockdale 2010) and cities (Korpela 2020) also attract retirees. However, the scope of possible IRM destinations has broadened both in terms of new countries beyond European destinations (Bolzman *et al.* 2021; Botterill 2017; Ertuğrul 2016; Green 2014) and new regions adjacent to previously popular areas (King *et al.* 2019). Bulgaria is an emerging destination country for Italian pensioners on the periphery of the EU, due to its lower cost of living and coastal character (Iorio 2020). Recent research has demonstrated that Hungary, as a landlocked post-socialist country, has also become a target country for IRM, mainly for older German citizens (Koós, Tátrai and Gábríel 2025). In our article, we aim to put Hungary on the rapidly changing map of international retirement migration (King *et al.* 2021). Central and Eastern European countries seem to be becoming increasingly preferred target destinations for retired and near-to-retirement migrants, which can be explained by increasing structural constraints in their home country and a lower costs of living in the host countries, underlining the relevance of the concept of geoarbitrage (Hayes 2014; Iorio 2020).

Hungary as an old/new destination for older German citizens

Hungary is a post-socialist country (thus globally having a semi-peripheral position) and has been a member of the EU since 2004. Its economic indicators are below the EU – and very often the Visegrad Group countries' – average. Hungary's political and economic dependencies did not arrive with its EU accession but can be traced to much earlier – to the period of state socialism. Melegh (2023) raises the point about Hungary's dependency concerning migration processes by highlighting the role of the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) and related social and institutional changes. He argues that the increases in emigration and FDI rates are correlated both globally and in Eastern European countries. While Hungary has been both a sending and a destination country for labour migrants since the transition in 1989 and especially after its EU accession, it became an increasingly popular target area for older migrants from Western Europe, especially Germany (Koós *et al.* 2025).

The migration of Western European citizens to rural Hungary is not a new phenomenon. Ethnographic research in the early 2000s reported an increasing number of migrants who had bought houses and settled permanently in the countryside since 1990 (Járosi 2006; Szőke 2006). Among them, Germans formed the largest group, the majority of whom were lower-middle-class retirees. They preferred the south-western region of Hungary, attracted by the proximity of Lake Balaton and the numerous thermal baths. Within the region, the most popular destination was Somogy County, where German migrants settled in small peripheral villages with only a few hundred inhabitants, characterised by population decline and ageing, impoverishment, insufficient infrastructure and a shortage of public and private services. As Szőke pointed out, retired German migrants were pursuing amenity-led lives and their relocation to rural Hungary served 'as a strategy to maximise consumption. (...) they receive their proper welfare assistance from Germany, which they spend in a place where prices are relatively lower (...) they can afford more types of goods and commodities in Hungary than they would in Germany' (Szőke 2006: 43). Their relatively privileged position in the locality was manifested in their bigger, renovated houses and higher pensions and levels of consumption compared to local inhabitants (Járosi 2006; Szőke 2006). We could say that the evidence from these early ethnographic research studies fits the concept of both lifestyle migration and geoarbitrage.

According to the 2022 census data, the number of foreign citizens living in Hungary has increased significantly since the turn of the millennium (2001 = 93,000, 2022 = 218,000). The increase is particularly noticeable in the case of older (60+ years) migrants; their number tripled over 20 years (9,600 and 37,000, respectively). Most older migrants came from Germany, ahead of countries such as Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium. German citizens constitute not only the largest group among older foreign citizens living in Hungary but also, between 2001 and 2022, the most dynamically expanding one (1,003 and 11,240, respectively). The 2022 census data are in accordance with the pension stock statistics provided by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany: in 2022, an average of 11,460 retirees living in Hungary received an old-age pension from Germany (Rente 2022), while this average number was only 5,361 in 2012 (Die Rentenbestände in Der Gesetzlichen Rentenversicherung in Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2012). Hungary's growing popularity as a destination country may depend on at least two structural factors. Indeed, Hungary's EU membership (since 2004) facilitates the relocation of retired and near-to-retirement European Union citizens, providing them with freedom of movement, the transfer of pensions and other benefits or liquid assets as well as entitlements to residence and health services. The costs of housing and everyday life in Hungary may also attract German citizens. However, as we will argue below, political and ideological values, meanings and imaginations (Xiang and Nyíri 2022)

attached to Hungary also shape the decision to relocate to the country, representing a recently emerging phenomenon in IRM scholarship. In other words, the migration of older German citizens to Hungary is not primarily of interest because it places the country on the map of IRM but, rather, because it highlights the increasing importance of political and ideological motivations as incentives of international retirement migration.

Compared to other older Western European citizens who tend to live in the capital and bigger cities, the majority of older German migrants prefer rural areas as places of residence. Most of them were registered in South-West Transdanubia, mainly in small, peripheral villages in Somogy and Zala County (Koós *et al.* 2025). Previous research evidence (Járosi 2006; Szőke 2006) and recent statistical data indicate a certain continuity regarding older German migrants' preferences by selecting regions and settlements to relocate. The remarkable consistency of their spatial distribution could be explained by the relatively low estate prices (Koós *et al.* 2025) in peripheral villages, which may correspond with the lower socio-economic status of migrants in their home country.

Methodology and some characteristics of the interviewees

Research fields and research method

The selection of the field sites was based on quantitative data analysis. In the first step, we chose the South Transdanubian region, Somogy County in Hungary, where a relatively large group of older German migrants live (Koós *et al.* 2025). In the second step, we did preliminary fieldwork in villages in Somogy County: we conducted interviews with the mayors, local inhabitants and migrants aged over 50 in order to explore these places' social and economic situations and the effects of the Western European citizens' immigration on these settlements. In the third step, we chose three small villages (with a population of 200–700) where we carried out sociological fieldwork conducting interviews with local inhabitants and migrants between 2022 and 2023.¹

By selecting these small and disadvantaged villages, we aimed to examine in depth why these German citizens relocate to peripheral villages which are lacking good infrastructure, amenities or unique landscapes and which usually attract more-affluent-lifestyle migrants. We contacted our interviewees using the snowball method as well as via random encounters or visits. In total, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Western European migrants,² among them 24 from Germany, of whom 21 people were older than 50. The majority of them (16 interviewees) had relocated to Hungary since the mid-2010s.

The interviews were conducted in German and recorded in the migrants' home; they lasted from one to three hours. Our questions covered the motivation for and the history of migration and an evaluation of the interviewees' lives and homes in the sending and receiving countries. The interviews were also open to new topics that the interviewees wanted to share. It is important to note that the interviews with migrants aged 50+ were conducted and analysed by Hungarian researchers, who do not share the same social experiences as their interviewees. Consequently, Hungarian researchers were more or less unfamiliar with the social, economic and political context of Germany – especially in terms of lived experiences – but were familiar with the Hungarian context. *Vice versa*, these German migrants were quite unfamiliar with the broader Hungarian social, economic and political context. However, this did not prevent them from creating a big picture of the 'Hungarian reality', representing it as an attractive destination for those who want to leave Germany. Since both the unfamiliarity and familiarity of the

social horizons were mutually brought into play during the interviews and the analysis (Ertuğrul 2016), we consider these interviews as narratives crystallising – besides personal experiences – the migrants' subjective perceptions and individual representations of social reality. These narratives can show how these migrants subjectively perceive and interpret their situation in the sending and the receiving countries, how their interpretations of their migration trajectory help them to express what they are afraid of and what they wish for in the future (Lamont and Swidler 2014).

The interviews were transcribed and analysed with the focus on the main topics of the interviews. In this paper, we concentrate on the complex set of motivations for migration. During the analysis, we identified different patterns and topics 'emerging' from the interviews, which were subsequently grouped and interpreted as different motivations to migrate. Nevertheless, these motivations can only be analytically dissected from each other: their interpretation opens the way to scrutinise the complex nexus of economic, social, political and ideological motives in shaping migration decisions. Our analysis is partly inspired by the grounded-theory approach (Charmaz 1995) and also closely resembles ethnographic content analysis, especially in terms of analysing the data in an inductive, iterative and reflexive way (Altheide 1987).

Who is coming? Older German migrants in three peripheral settlements

The composition of our interviewees is diverse in both geographic and socio-economic terms. Within Germany, they lived in different regions and in diverse types of settlement (metropolises, cities and villages) before their relocation to Hungary. With the exception of a few younger families and individuals, our interviewees were either near to retirement or retired (50–64 years and older) living on old-age or early pensions or disability benefits. The age composition of the sample corresponds to recent research evidence on the flexible timing of migration in older age (Bolzman *et al.* 2021; Green 2014). Some families near to retirement live on their savings from the sale of their property in the home country and/or run a small enterprise in Hungary. Their previous occupations are diverse, ranging from small entrepreneurs to public and private employees, indicating lower-middle and working-class positions in the home society. Some of the interviewees reported unstable employment in their active lives, which unfavourably impacted on their financial conditions and perspective in their retirement years. In line with recent research evidence, the socio-economic composition of our interviewees illustrates the growing participation of lower-class and economically vulnerable groups in IRM (Botterill 2017; Iorio 2020; King *et al.* 2021; Toyota 2022).

The majority of the interviewees live permanently in their Hungarian homes; only a few use their property as a second home. Some had never visited Hungary before migrating there and even those who had visited, had not planned to settle at tourist destinations. Their decisions were not influenced by tourist attractions and leisure facilities. Rather, in choosing their future place of residence in Hungary, the most important consideration was the favourable price of properties, which indicates their lower or even vulnerable socio-economic status and explains their relocation to peripheral villages.

The decision to migrate is always a complex process, interwoven with individual motives, expectations, hopes and desires. Some of our interviewees reported 'watershed moments' (Benson 2012: 10), representing a turning point in their lives – such as the loss of a family member or a new relationship – as factors that brought about migration. They also mentioned the search for tranquility and a slower pace of life and even a wide space suitable for keeping horses or subsistence farming, as important considerations. However, when our interviewees explained why they had left their home countries and had chosen Hungary as a new destination, besides individual motives, financial

considerations (affordable price of estate, lower living costs) and, in some cases, geographical proximity to family members, most of them referred to subjective experiences of worsening political climate and deteriorating social and economic conditions and perspectives as motivations for both leaving the home country and relocating to Hungary. With very few exceptions, such an argumentation was surprisingly common among those migrants who had arrived in the last few years, since the mid-2010s. It explains why we focus on this subgroup of 16 German migrants aged 50+ in this analysis.

Results: Migrant narratives reflecting relative status loss in relation to social changes

Based on the analysis of the empirical data, three intersecting topics emerged which underpin the complexity of the phenomenon of international retirement migration and demonstrate the interrelated motives of migrants aged 50+ arriving in Hungary from Germany. Topics emerging from the migration narratives were subsequently grouped under the following concepts, containing both the perceptions and the interpretations of deteriorating conditions in the home country within the individual narratives: 1) immigration to Germany was perceived as a threat to safety and culture; 2) the management of the COVID pandemic was interpreted as the lack of political and public representation and the restriction of individual autonomy; and 3) social injustice, resulting in the crisis of livelihood. In this section, we analytically dissect these topics and interpret the interplay of the three domains.

Immigration to Germany: physical and cultural threat

The first main topic reflects the interviewees' perceptions and interpretations of immigration to Germany, which they interpret as a threat to their safety in both the physical and the cultural sense in the country of origin. The participants expressed the feeling of being threatened at both an individual and a cultural level, mainly due to the increasingly growing immigrant population, especially the inflow of non-Christian migrants from outside of Europe. Beyond the perceived threat to their individual safety, challenges concerning living together with the migrant population and the restriction of freedom as a barrier of individual autonomy were also depicted, as the following excerpt from an interview with two women shows:

J: We're Catholic. We want to eat pork.

H: Exactly!

J: We want women to wear short skirts.

H: Exactly!

J: I want to go where I want.

H: And in Germany it's not like that. In Germany, women have to walk around in closed dresses because if they rape her, they say it's her fault because she was wearing a short skirt. And this is absolutely not right! (Helga and Josefa, F.-s, 60 and 75 years old).

As the interviewees expressed their opinions, they excitedly interrupted each other, constructing common meanings of being threatened. These meanings are not fixed but are created through contrasting the two groups which make the comparison rather one-sided and selective. In their accounts, Christianity equals a non-Islamic, European and white population. The following excerpt makes this contrast even sharper, linking it to crimes committed by non-white immigrants and expressing general threat and fear as a reason to leave Germany.

[The city] is no longer safe. Why? Because all the dark-skinned people are walking around with knives. A good acquaintance of mine lost his son last week. He was stabbed. Just for nothing. That's it. And this has happened several times. And that's when I really say I do not want to live here [in Germany] (Ulla, F. 53 years old).

These elements are intertwined with the critical attitudes towards the current redistribution of welfare benefits. Our empirical research points out that welfare services provided to the immigrants and refugees in the country of origin provoked indignation among German citizens aged 50+ who were settled in Hungary and who resent the immigration and social policies that put them at a disadvantage.

The millions of refugees who live now in Germany are beneficiaries of our social system. They immediately enter our social system. A German woman who has worked for her whole life hardly receives any pension. But every refugee receives a pension without having ever paid a cent [of tax]. This is a great disparity. (...) Now, when someone comes as a refugee from Ukraine, which is outside the EU, to Germany, they receive a pension. (...) I have to work until I am 67 yet these Ukrainian women receive a pension at the age of 59. And I, as a German woman, receive it only when I am 67. (...) And this is such an imbalance, outrageous to all Germans! This needs to be said. It doesn't work that way (Johanna, F. 62).

Some of our interviewees reported that they began to seriously think about their migration after 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Middle East had entered Europe, especially Germany. Even those who had arrived in Hungary before 2015 mentioned the growing number of immigrants as a sign that 'things are going wrong' in their home country and one that encourages the recent out-migration flow. Besides anxiety over the loss of their individual safety and the vulnerability of Western culture and society, participants also expressed their feelings of being excluded from the public because they felt that the problems and fears related to the immigration of third-country citizens, especially Muslims, were not represented in politics and the mainstream media.

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic: the lack of political and public representation and the restriction of individual autonomy

The second topic emerging from the narratives of these German migrants was the lack of political representation and the erosion of autonomy that were perceived as the restricted expression of opinion on social issues in their home country. This topic emerged in the context of in-migration and the German government's migration policy as well; however, our interviewees' feeling of being marginalised in public had only intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic was a frequently problematised issue in the interviews for various reasons, as it united several challenges of everyday life. Many of the interviewees decided to move to Hungary during or shortly after the end of the pandemic, which means that the migration decision was possibly related to the COVID-19 situation.

COVID-19 brought several restrictive measures into everyday life, including obligatory screening, the mandatory wearing of face masks in certain institutions, lockdown and strongly recommended vaccination. The fear of losing control over one's own body and the problem of the 'indoctrination' of the government and the mainstream media in Germany were raised by many migrant interviewees.

When people took to the streets to protest about Corona, the police beat people. People were beaten, for their rights! Why should my body, why should my body, if I don't want it, be vaccinated? Why!? It is my body! Why?! And if I get sick, I'm sick. I don't give a damn! (Helga, F. 60).

[In Germany] I see a lot of lying, manipulation and forcing people to have an opinion that's dictated by the state. You can't think freely anymore; you can't say what you think! Otherwise, you'll be cornered right away. And I think that's terrible. (...) [During the COVID pandemic] You couldn't make your own decision. The restrictions became harsher and harsher and went in the direction that one became an outcast if one had a different opinion. (...) I, as far as my health is concerned, it is my responsibility – and I won't let politics prescribe to me... That's what I don't understand and I won't let them force me to... And this was one of the reasons [for migration] (Emma, F. 57)

While immigration and the German migration policy were clearly rejected by our interviewees, the judgment on the Covid pandemic and the related policy was not unanimous among migrants aged 50+. While some had been vaccinated, others not only refused to be but questioned the severity of the epidemic. The interviewees also revealed that there had been a heated debate among them about the pandemic and the vaccination. However, some of the interviewees experienced and interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic and the related measures as a threat to one's basic human rights in terms of restrictions on freedom of expression and on decisions over one's own body. In the accounts of these interviewees, the restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the virus are perceived as the constraint of peoples' individual agency, resulting in the general dissatisfaction with and distrust in the state and politics – and often giving 'the last push' to migrate.

Social injustice resulting in the crisis of livelihood

From the perspective of our interviewees, the critique of German migration policy is also connected to the redistribution of welfare benefits, which favours refugees and immigrants who are implicitly labelled by the participants as undeserving beneficiaries of goods – in particular, social allowances produced by tax-paying citizens.

Our interviewees' judgement on the redistribution policy in their country of origin is also linked to the current crisis of the Russo-Ukrainian War in a twofold way. In addition to complaints about the support of immigrants, we heard stories about Ukrainians arriving in Germany on buses to pick up aid for refugees and then returning on the same bus to Ukraine. However, beyond that, as the excerpt below illustrates, some interviewees formulated a more general criticism of the support for Ukraine before and during the war.

I don't understand German politicians. We started a war [WW2]. Why do they interfere in the war of Ukraine? And they supported Ukraine also before the war. Does Hungary [do] the same? Surely not. Germany supports every country... and our pensioners, our pensioners! I saw it when I went to work early in the morning. I saw pensioners looking [for food] in the trash. And you feel ashamed! Because our own German people have nothing to – eat and they throw away the money! (Helga, F. 60).

In the accounts of some participants, redistribution policies linked to the immigration and the Russo-Ukrainian War favour foreign countries as well as immigrants and refugees to the detriment of its citizens, especially pensioners living in poverty. This was dramatically portrayed in stories about

pensioners being forced to rummage through the garbage or to 'collect empty bottles and expired food to survive' (Helmut, M. 63). This generally dark picture of economically deprived pensioners in the country of origin becomes more nuanced and personalised by individual experiences of financial and economic constraints which reveal more personal economic motivations to migrate to Hungary. The consequences of immigration to Germany and the COVID-19 pandemic were narrated in ideological and political terms, in a discursive way that may push into the background economic factors such as structural constraints and lived experiences and as a fundamental motivation for migration to Hungary. However, livelihood crises, that is, the increasing costs of energy, housing and day-to-day living, were reported by our interviewees regardless of their own economic and social status. Small entrepreneurs complained about the increasing costs of energy causing a shrinking demand for their services and unfavourable prospects for their business. Others, as the following excerpt illustrates, faced the risk of poverty in their home country.

My children asked me if I was going back. No. Because I wouldn't be able to afford the way I live with my pension and widow's pension alone in Germany. Then I really should live on the subsistence minimum, checking every cent to see if I can buy this or not, because the apartment rental is so expensive. (...) In Germany, I might ask 'Hello, I have 300 euros left [out of 1,200 euros]. How am I going to get out of this?' (Lotte, F. 73).

Whether they talked of their personal difficulties or not, our interviewees identified deteriorating living conditions in general, especially for retirees, as an incentive for migration, pointing to the declining purchase power of the pensions: 'A lot of people come here because of their pensions. In Germany, everything became so expensive that they can't pay it from their pensions' (Josefa, F. 75).

In his research on North American and Canadian retired migrants in Ecuador, Hayes found that research participants escaping the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis often identified themselves or were described by previously arrived migrants as 'economic refugees' (Hayes 2015; Hayes and Pérez-Gañán 2016). However, our interviewees did not talk about themselves as economic refugees and when asked why they had relocated to Hungary, they did not at first mention economic motivations. However, the accounts on the general economic and individually experienced livelihood crisis and the impossibility to 'survive' on their current or expected pensions points to their economic and social vulnerability – i.e., their lived or feared impoverishment and the relative loss of their economic and social status in their home country. Yet, it should be emphasised that, in the narratives of recently arrived German migrants aged over 50, the general economic and individually experienced livelihood crisis alone does not explain or justify their migration decisions. The economic and livelihood crisis and the fear of status loss or impoverishment are linked to and interpreted as the deteriorating consequences of the immigration and welfare policies of the German government. Thus, in these narratives, economic, political and ideological considerations, as incentive factors of relocation to Hungary, are inextricably intertwined.

Portraying the receiving country

The 'narratives of decline' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009: 610) – that is, the lived experiences as well as the feared cultural, political, social and economic impacts of recent changes in the home country, as presented above – culminate in statements that we often heard from our interviewees, such as 'Germany

has completely changed' and 'Germany is no more my country'. Most of them also expressed their intention to never return.

The accounts of recently arrived German migrants aged over 50 represent the search for a better quality of life abroad as a 'comparative project' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009: 610). Thus, the explanations of why our interviewees decided to migrate are based on the perceived contrasts between the home and destination countries. It is important to note that we never asked our interviewees about their political views, party preferences or how they think about Hungarian politics – and we did not encourage them to make direct comparisons between the home and the host countries. However, during the interviews, while portraying the deteriorating circumstances in their home country, they obviously contrasted them to the Hungarian conditions, especially in ideological and political terms.

In the context of immigration to Germany, the perceived threat to individual safety has frequently been contrasted with the feeling of safety in the host country. While complaining about the crimes committed by immigrants, our interviewees added that, in Hungary, they do not have to be afraid of being attacked on the streets and they can dress as women however they wish. Referring to the strong 'indoctrination of the state' and the strict restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, some participants felt that, in Hungary, 'There is more freedom here' (Johanna, F. 62). In the accounts of our interviewees, the attractive Hungarian conditions are presented in a personalised way – that is, they are attributed to the politics of the then Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán. While 'Germany does nothing for its people' (Helmut, M. 63), Orbán is praised for 'standing for his own people'. 'Orbán wants to stay out of the war [in Ukraine] and he is absolutely right' (Helga, F. 60). In contrast to Germany, where retirees are facing poverty, in Hungary Orbán 'is doing something for pensioners, even if by a small amount – and he twice raised pensions'. Moreover, 'He does not allow migrants to enter the country, does not welcome refugees' (Josefa, F. 75). 'Orbán has a very good family policy, it must be said. It has nothing to do with this gender or LGBTQ... things. He supports families and from our Christian point of view, this is the right way' (Johanna, F. 62). She also added how delighted she and her husband were with the result of the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election (with the victory of Fidesz, the ruling party since 2010), because 'it turned out that Orbán is very good and it strengthened us that we had made a good decision [to migrate to Hungary]'.

Our empirical analysis suggests that the meanings of values such as freedom, safety, autonomy or Christianity are less fixed but flexible and situational since they are selectively interpreted in and by the contrast between Germany and Hungary as their home and host countries. These meanings are constructed in the migration narratives and serve as the basis for the justification of the migration decision. In this way, the inherently selective comparison between home and host countries creates a discursively constructed 'political landscape' of Hungary as a safe and free host country.

Discussion

Through its lens focusing on migrants' narratives, research on lifestyle migration provides a broad framework on how motives and imaginations shape decisions to migrate and start a new life in other places (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Hayes 2021). The complexity of the motives, values and imaginations of migrants aged over 50 may vary from person to person. However, they show well identifiable patterns based on similar individual experiences and perceptions and shared meanings and discourses. These patterns of motives and imaginaries might be – and, in fact, are – very complex and interrelated (Savaş *et al.* 2023; Spaan, Henkens and Kalmijn 2023; Xiang and Nyíri 2022) and may change over time with the subsequent flows of migration.

In the Hungarian case, analysis of the narratives of German migrants over 50 revealed the complex nexus of ideological, political and economic motivations and their dynamically changing constellation as well as the construction of values, imaginations, hopes and wishes attached to Hungary, all fueling migration and the selection of the destination country. Those who had moved to rural Hungary in the early 2000s more often mentioned economic and lifestyle considerations as the motivation for their migration. They wished to start a new life abroad by looking for an affordable property and low cost of living as well as for a quiet and calm rural environment. On the contrary, those retired and near-to-retirement migrants who have relocated to Hungary in recent years, ahead of financial and lifestyle-related motives, emphasised the perceived threat and the lived experiences of political, social and economic changes and their detrimental consequences on their lives in Germany, triggering their decision to migrate. The strikingly concordant discourses of adverse changes in their home country range from immigration as a threat to personal safety, culture, the COVID-19 pandemic and related policies and the contribution of the Russo-Ukrainian War to the livelihood crisis, which are all interpreted and narrated in very similar ideological and political ways. When explaining the motives for migration, our interviewees depicted the living conditions and the ideological and political climate in their home country as becoming intolerable for them and argued that they had had no other choice but to 'escape' by relocating to Hungary, which is considered to be a 'safe' country in ideological and political terms and which is often contrasted to the country of origin. For them, Hungary has been an attractive destination because of their interpretation and imaginaries of its political landscape that would fit their desires and expectations.

Lifestyle migration is a process rather than an act and therefore an inherently 'reflexive project' of individuals. Scholars draw attention to the fact that migrants explaining the context or reasons and motives for their migration always tell us 'retrospective stories' *after* their relocation (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2016). Hayes points out that we need to take into account that 'discussions of motivations are not always true representations but often are stories that are told in order to justify a decision' (Hayes 2015: 271). Keeping this in mind, we should emphasise that our interviewees did not explicitly state that they had chosen Hungary for ideological and political reasons. However, the discursively constructed contrast highlighting the difference between the home and the receiving country retrospectively justified their decision to relocate to Hungary, a country portrayed as providing shelter for those who want to escape the consequences of the perceived political, social and economic decline in Germany. The decisive role of imaginings of other locations is widely analysed in the literature on lifestyle migration (Benson 2010, 2012; Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Hayes 2021). As our findings reveal, migrants aged 50+ moving recently to rural Hungary have not been motivated by dreams of a rural idyll, beautiful landscapes, a healthy climate or cultural heritage but, rather, by imaginings of the political landscape of a country presenting a safe and free place to live.

Drawing on examples from China and Russia, Xiang and Nyíri (2022) argue that major shifts in the world after the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine may increase the importance of values in the migration process. As our research highlights, the meanings of values such as freedom, safety and autonomy were constructed in and by contrasting the home and the host countries, influencing both the decision to migrate and the selection of the destination country.

Our analysis illustrates that the predominance of political reasoning in the narratives of recently relocated migrants aged over 50 may conceal (or at least push into the background) the importance of economic factors, both in terms of lived experience and of structural constraints. A recent survey conducted among Dutch retirement migrants in the top 40 destination countries, among them Hungary, analysed the correlation between the main motives for migration, the selected destination and migrants'

socio-economic status. They concluded that ‘people whose migration was economically motivated were more likely to migrate to Hungary, where people would benefit from the lower cost of living compared to the Netherlands’ (Spaan *et al.* 2023: 13). In our research, German migrants aged over 50 did not mention economic reasons for migration as the most significant motivation. However, in the course of the interviews, they thematised economic and financial hardship and a fear of impoverishment which, together, outline their vulnerable economic and social position and imply a probable (and relative) status loss in their home country. They relocated to a low-cost country because they could not live up to the standard that they consider as a decent and safe life and could not afford to realise their plans and dreams in their home countries for financial reasons. Our research evidence underlines the relevance of the concept of geoarbitrage at the geographical scale of inter-European migration (Hayes 2014, 2015, 2021; Hayes and Pérez-Gañán 2016; Iorio 2020). By migrating to peripheral settlements in a semi-peripheral country of Central and Eastern Europe, our interviewees escaped the risk of poverty or relative status loss and managed to maintain their relatively privileged socio-economic position as Western European citizens through relocation. However, the analysis of the narratives of recently arrived German migrants over 50 shows that, in the Hungarian case, economic factors influencing the decision on relocation to a Central and Eastern European lower-cost country are inextricably intertwined with and embedded in political and ideological considerations.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of interviews conducted with a specific subgroup – the recently arrived German migrants aged 50 and over relocating to peripheral small villages in Hungary – the aim of this paper was to contribute to IRM scholarship with empirical evidence from Central and Eastern Europe. Statistical data on Western European, especially older German citizens’, migration to Hungary indicate an increasingly significant migration process, putting the country on the map of IRM. Our qualitative research highlights the complex and changing economic, political, and ideological motives fueling retirement migration to rural Hungary and implies the growing importance of political and ideological considerations in migration decisions.

We are aware of the limitations of our explorative study, especially the lack of statistical validity: our research evidence does not provide general conclusions relevant to all older (German) migrants relocating to rural Hungary. We analysed the narratives of a specific subgroup of German migrants aged over 50, the recently arrived who settled down in the Hungarian rural periphery. The conduction and analysis of the interviews are framed by the mutual unfamiliarity and familiarity of the social horizons (Ertuğrul 2016) since the researcher and the migrant participants come from different countries – and, even if they currently live in the same country, this is not necessarily in the same social realities. We consider the interview transcripts to be narratives displaying personally lived experiences, fears or subjective perceptions and interpretations of social phenomena. This means that we did not seek to challenge these different social realities against each other beyond the extent to which the interviewees did so in their comparisons in the interviews; nor did we seek to confront them with any potential internal contradictions in their opinions.

Despite these limitations, our research evidence is consistent with other research findings on IRM and reveals new tendencies in the subsequent flows of international retirement migration in the European context. We demonstrated the socio-economic heterogeneity of migrants, the participation of less-affluent and more-vulnerable groups in IRM and the relevance of economic considerations in their decision on migration. While focusing on the complex set of motivations in the migration decision, we

identified a specific subgroup of German over 50s migrants who have recently relocated to peripheral villages in rural Hungary and who emphasised less the lifestyle-oriented and more the political, ideological motives in their narration. The meanings of values and imaginations attached to Hungary, however, are not fixed but actively constructed by contrasting the home and receiving countries in the migration narratives. However, our results indicate that political and ideological considerations are becoming more important in migration (Xiang and Nyíri 2022), while this does not seem entirely independent from lived fears of (relative) status loss, impoverishment and the perceived changes of the redistribution policy. The Hungarian case corroborates the diversity and complexity of IRM demonstrated by previous research and highlights its changing characteristics in space and social composition over time.

Our research findings underline the analytical relevance of the conceptual frameworks elaborated by scholars of lifestyle migration and geoarbitrage in the context of international retirement migration to Central and Eastern Europe. The analysis showed the complexity of IRM and demonstrated that a single approach cannot explain this type of migration. While the conceptual framework of lifestyle migration thematises the phenomenon and provides details on the role of lifestyle factors within migration, the theoretical frame of geoarbitrage underlines prevailing global and social inequalities. The diversity of motivations and the complex nexus of social, economic and political dimensions are reflected in the individual perception of the changes in the home country related to the immigration of third-country nationals, the management of the COVID pandemic, the Russo-Ukrainian war and the overarching lived experience of the crisis of livelihood. This perception also mobilises fears and desires and the values of freedom, security and autonomy constructed in and by migration narratives which, in these individual migration stories, justify the relocation to small peripheral villages in Hungary. Beyond that, the main contribution of our analysis is to bring to light political and ideological motivations rooted in a general dissatisfaction with the political climate in the home country as essential incentive factors in the discussion of IRM.

Notes

1. In accordance with ethical standards and GDPR regulations, all interviewees were informed about the project's aim and the way we use data before the start of the interview. We asked for their consent to record and assured them that data would be anonymised. As a consequence, all the names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.
2. During the preliminary fieldwork we learned from mayors and other locals that the vast majority of Western European migrants came from Germany; however, we did not want to limit our interviews to German migrants. We also conducted interviews with migrants from the Netherlands, England, France and Belgium.

Funding

The project '(Pre)retirement Migration and Its Potential Development Impacts in Rural Hungary' [K 138 838] was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (Hungary).

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

AI use disclosure

The manuscript was written and edited by the authors, who received assistance from the Grammarly programme. This software tool was used only to format the text (for spelling and reference handling).

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How to cite this article: Gábríel D., Németh K., Váradi M. (2026). ‘In Hungary, Everything Is Better’ – Recently Arrived Older German Migrants’ Narratives about Relocating to Rural Hungary. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 15(1): 43–60.