

Liquid Migration Revisited: Two Decades after the EU Enlargements of 2004 and 2007

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The fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 20th century and the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 triggered significant migration from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to the 'old' EU member states, giving rise to what many consider to be a distinct form of migration. We coined the concept of 'liquid migration' to describe this new, more temporary, flexible and unpredictable East–West migration in Europe. Now, two decades after the EU enlargements of 2004, we explore whether circular, temporary and repeated migration patterns are prevalent in intra-EU mobility or if there is a shift towards settlement. As an empirical basis, we use a large collection of migration studies which refer to the concept of liquid migration. We found three different migration patterns. The first is permanent or long-term settlement. The other two are more transient but for different reasons. The second pattern is temporariness by choice: some CEE migrants opt for open-ended, flexible lifestyles and work careers. Other CEE migrants seem to be trapped in liquid migration, the third pattern. Even if they prefer to settle in a destination country, they appear to be unable to acquire the resources necessary for settlement.

Keywords: intra-EU migration, temporary migration, liquid migration, settlement

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Introduction

The fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 20th century and the enlargements of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 triggered significant migration from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to the 'old' EU member states, giving rise to what is often considered as a distinct form of migration. Favell (2008: 701) claimed that this migration after the EU enlargement process resulted in 'the emergence of a new migration system in Europe' where traditional migration theories no longer apply. While 'old migration' typically involved the long-term relocation and permanent settlement of migrants and their families, 'new migration' is characterised by temporariness, flexibility, open-endedness and individualisation. Short distances, cheap transport and the removal of borders within Europe resulted in new migration patterns: 'East European migrants are in fact regional "free movers" not immigrants and, with the borders open, they are more likely to engage in temporary circular and transnational mobility ...' (Favell 2008: 703). Wallace (2002: 604) similarly foresaw '...short-term, circulatory movements backwards and forwards across borders' as typical of new migration in the enlarged EU.

Other scholars used terms such as 'incomplete migration' referring to migratory movements without settlement that were typical of post-communist migration within Central and Eastern Europe (Okólski 2001), 'lasting temporariness' (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2005), 'intentional unpredictability' (Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich 2006) and 'undeliberate determinacy' (McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017) to characterise the new migration in Europe. In this period, we introduced the concept of 'liquid migration' (Engbersen 2012; 2018; Engbersen and Snel 2013; Engbersen, Snel and de Boom 2010; Engbersen *et al.* 2013). Liquid migration is characterised by a lack of permanent settlement. Migrants move between their home country and receiving countries or among multiple destination countries. The defining aspect of liquid migration is its temporary, flexible and unpredictable character, with migrants working in different European labour markets before deciding on settling, moving home or moving elsewhere. Liquid migration is emblematic of European post-accession labour migration, driven by institutional changes such as open borders in the European Union, flexible labour markets, looser family ties and affordable means of travel and communication (Engbersen 2018).

Now, two decades after the EU enlargements of 2004, we must ask whether circular, temporary and repeated migration patterns are still prevalent in intra-EU mobility or if there is a shift towards settlement, as some critics suggest. How has contemporary migration within the EU evolved in terms of temporariness and flexibility? Additionally, how can we explain these migratory behaviours – whether flexible, temporary movements or a trend toward settlement – given the opportunity structures available to different types of migrants? These are the guiding research questions which we aim to address in this literature review.

Over the past 15 years, we have been fortunate that fellow researchers have referred to our work and to the concept of liquid migration. In this article, we draw upon their insights and research findings to address the research questions outlined above. Our central thesis posits that intra-EU migration is, to a significant extent, genuinely temporary. A substantial number of labour migrants from Central and Eastern European (hereafter CEE) countries either settle or intend to settle more permanently in the 'old' EU countries. However, this trend towards settlement co-exists with open-ended, flexible and temporary migration patterns. In our analysis, we distinguish two different patterns of liquid migration. For certain CEE migrants, temporariness is a deliberate choice: they opt for open-ended, flexible lifestyles and work careers. For others, temporary or circular migration is a necessity. As Bygnes and Erdal (2017: 105) noted, these migrants appear to be 'trapped' in 'liquid migration', unable to acquire the resources necessary to settle.

Before delving into the empirical data, we first elaborate on the concept of liquid migration. While we occasionally refer to the broader notion of intra-EU mobility, our focus in this paper is on migration flows from CEE countries to Western member states. Although, the concept of liquid migration has sometimes been used in studies on South–North mobility in the EU (Fernández-Suárez, Lama and Silva 2024) and to non-EU contexts (Azeredo 2023), such cases lie beyond the scope of our analysis.

The concept of liquid migration

The concept of liquid migration draws directly from Zygmunt Bauman’s work (Bauman 2000; 2005) on liquid modernity. Central to the concept of liquidity is the transformation of once ‘solid’ institutions – such as class, family, labour, community, neighbourhood, welfare state and nation state – into more flexible and fluid forms of social organisation. These institutions, once pivotal in shaping the interplay between individual choices and collective projects, have become less solid and less predictable and lose their compelling and self-evident character in the melting pot of modern society. As Bauman (2005: 1) notes: ‘Liquid modern’ is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines. Liquidity of life and that of society feed and reinvigorate each other. Liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long’.

The rise of more temporary and flexible migration patterns in Europe, especially among CEE migrants, reflects these structural institutional changes in both origin and destination countries. These changes include political transitions, border regulations, mobility regimes, labour markets, communication technologies and evolving family structures. The transition from communism to liberal democracies, for instance, gave CEE citizens more freedom to migrate (Black *et al.* 2010; Fihel and Kaczmarczyk 2023; Kaczmarczyk, Aldaz-Carroll and Hołda 2020). The EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, along with the removal of internal borders, further facilitated movement within the EU. Technological changes, especially the rise of social media, offered new ways to explore migration opportunities and destinations. Simultaneously, the increase of temporary work, part-time work and self-employment in various European countries created a demand for CEE migrant workers. The individualisation of family relations also provided more autonomy and freedom to individual family members, particularly the younger generations. Finally, large workforce surpluses in CEE countries and significant wage disparities between older and new member states, made migration an attractive option for many CEE citizens (ILO 2024; Kaczmarczyk *et al.* 2020). In earlier publications, we identified six characteristics of intra-EU liquid migration (Engbersen 2012, 2018; Engbersen and Snel 2013):

- *Temporality of stay.* Migrants do not settle but move back and forth from their origin country to receiving countries (circular migration), operate in in-between situations that are neither wholly temporary nor wholly permanent – or move to multiple destination countries. This temporary nature makes them less visible in official population records, as they often do not register. Some reside in informal or temporary accommodation like hostels or pensions, further contributing to their invisibility.
- *Labour migration.* Intra-European migration consists predominantly of first-generation labour migrants and, partially, student migration.
- *Regular migration.* Liquid migration involves migrants with legal status. EU citizens generally have, to a certain degree, the same rights and obligations as native citizens in the destination

country. However, during transitional periods, some EU migrant workers needed work permits to access labour markets.

- *No predestined destination country.* Intra-European liquid migration is increasingly unpredictable. Some migrants move to traditional destinations like Germany, while others go to newer ones like the UK, Ireland, Sweden, Belgium, Norway and the Netherlands. They respond to shifting local labour market conditions, leading to more 'unexpected' migration flows to new destination countries.
- *Individualised family strategies.* Contrasting with previous forms of labour migration that relied on the solidarity between generations and extended family to facilitate mobility (e.g., parents migrate to earn money while the grandparents care for the children), new patterns of intra-European migration are more individualised. Many contemporary migrants have looser family ties and limited family obligations.
- *Intentional unpredictability.* Liquid migration entails a migratory habitus of deliberate changeability. Migrants go to new destinations without clear plans or aspirations concerning their goals and future. They are less bounded by family obligations, borders and labour markets than previous generations. They keep their options open and may change their aspirations and goals during their journeys. This is especially true for young, single and highly educated migrants.

This literature review focuses on the issue of temporality, particularly because most empirical studies referring to the concept of liquid migration highlight this aspect. We also consider other institutional factors, especially the position of labour migrants in the labour market, insofar as this is addressed in the literature. Our focus is on intra-EU East–West migration, although the concept of liquid migration has been applied to other migration flows.

The concept of liquid migration met several criticisms (Azeredo 2023; Engbersen 2018; King 2018). First, some authors claim that the concept of liquid migration overestimates the temporariness and unpredictability of contemporary intra-EU migration. They argue that intra-EU labour migrants often settle or at least prefer to settle in destination countries and to have secure and stable 'grounded lives' (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Ryan 2018; 2019). Some suggest that temporary migration is a first stage in upcoming migration flows which will ultimately result in more permanent settlement (Friberg 2012). Pszczółkowska (2024) notes that, although young Polish migrants in England and Ireland initially saw their migration as temporary, over the years this orientation is gradually replaced by settlement-oriented strategies, as they seek to lead a more 'solid life'. These findings, along with others, are discussed more thoroughly in a next section. For now, we acknowledge that settlement migration is a reality for some intra-EU labour migrants. They settle permanently or for prolonged periods of time, searching for 'grounded lives' (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Engbersen *et al.* 2013). However, this review also presents significant examples of the temporary migration of intra-EU migrants, either driven by a preference for temporariness or because they lack the resources to settle.

A second criticism concerns the types of migrant involved. Okólski and Salt (2014: 32) argue that concepts such as liquid migration and intentional unpredictability imply that intra-EU migrants are predominantly the '...young and adventurous "vagabond" acting with no clear strategy...'. This portrayal overlooks the reality that many CEE migrants moving to the 'old' EU countries are still engaged in more traditional forms of (partly seasonal) labour migration, primarily in secondary labour markets (Fihel and Kaczmarczyk 2023). However, this aspect has always been part of the liquid migration concept. We have consistently argued that liquid migration also applies to lower-skilled, circular CEE labour

migrants, primarily because they lack the resources for permanent settlement. Related to this criticism is the selective nature of destination choices: after the EU enlargements, young and skilled Poles, Lithuanians and Slovaks largely migrated to the UK or Ireland, while most of those without degrees chose to migrate to continental Europe (Pszczółkowska 2024).

A third critic of the liquid migration concept is its tendency to overestimate migrants' agency while overlooking the negative structural realities of intra-EU migration (Azeredo 2023; King 2018). For numerous CEE migrant workers '...migratory life in the "West" is often about pure survival, living on low wages, and doing tough jobs in degrading conditions...' (King 2018: 2). Similarly, Fihel and Grabowska-Lusińska (2014) argue that the temporary patterns of Polish mobility to Western Europe were shaped by institutional barriers imposed by the receiving countries. Thus, the prevalence of temporary or liquid migration is not always due to the voluntary choices of migrants but is strongly influenced by the economic and institutional constraints which they face. Even when they wish to establish 'more-grounded lives', they are not able to do so due to insufficient incomes, precarious jobs and inadequate housing. In this review, we aim to address these criticisms more explicitly.

Methodology

This study draws on a literature review of works that referenced the articles and book chapters in which we introduced and discussed the concept of liquid migration. Since 2010, a significant number of studies on intra-EU mobility have engaged with our work. Through Google Scholar, we identified over 900 citations of our publications on this subject (Engbersen 2012, 2018; Engbersen and Snel 2013; Engbersen *et al.* 2010, 2013). These articles, book chapters and reports constitute the core corpus of literature for our review.

We began our review process in mid-February 2024 and completed it in November 2024. After receiving the reviews, we were also able to incorporate several recent articles and publications from 2025. Not all studies citing the concept of liquid migration were relevant to our analysis. Firstly, we included only those presenting empirical research directly engaging with liquid migration. Some studies referenced the concept only in passing – for instance, Vertovec (2019) mentioned it merely to contrast it with his own concept of 'superdiversity'. Secondly, we selected studies addressing intra-EU East–West migration, primarily labour migration but also including student migration. Thirdly, we strategically selected studies with divergent findings on temporality, including those indicating permanent settlement patterns among EU labour migrants.

These empirical studies will help to address two central research questions: firstly, are temporary and circular migration patterns (still) the dominant forms of intra-EU mobility, and to what extent is there evidence of a trend towards settlement? Secondly, can these migration patterns – whether temporary or orientated toward settlement – be explained by the institutional opportunity structures of migrants?

This study contributes to the existing body of literature on CEE labour migration in two ways. Firstly, it adopts a broader comparative perspective. Unlike studies that contain the results of qualitative research, targeting a specific 'type of migrant' (low- or high-skilled workers, international students, etc.) from specific countries (often Poland or the Baltic states but also Bulgaria or Romania) to one specific receiving country (several studies about the UK, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain or the Netherlands), our approach takes a more holistic view. There is relatively little systematic comparative research about intra-EU migration. This study seeks to address this gap by synthesising findings from

diverse studies on different migrant groups moving from various origin countries to a range of receiving countries.

Secondly, we include both qualitative and quantitative research findings in our analysis. There are relatively few quantitative studies on the topic of temporary intra-EU migration versus settlement. However, it is important to highlight the limitations of such studies when it comes to assessing migration duration. As Kaczmarczyk and Massey (2019: 25) point out, the issue of non-registration is a significant challenge. Population registers are often unreliable sources from which to assess the number of CEE migrants in destination countries and the length of their residence. This is because CEE migrants often fail to register upon arrival or departure (see also Grabowska-Lusińska 2013). For instance, in our own survey among Polish, Romanian and Bulgarian migrant workers in the Netherlands ($n=654$), about one third of our interviewees had not formally registered with the municipality where they live (Engbersen *et al.* 2013). Similarly, Strockmeijer, de Beer and Dagevos (2019), who analysed formal employment registration data to access the migration duration of CEE workers' stay in the Netherlands, found that at least half of the CEE migrants who were formally employed in the Netherlands had not registered in the municipality where they lived. In the Netherlands, registration is only mandatory for foreign individuals who stay (or intend to stay) in the country for at least for four months. Yet, many of the non-registered CEE migrants in both studies resided in the Netherlands much longer than four months. Kaczmarczyk and Massey (2019) thus argue that ethnosurveys may provide a more reliable understanding of the settlement practices of migrants compared to population register data.

Another limitation of using administrative data to access migration duration is selectivity. Population registers tend to overestimate the share of long-term residents when used to estimate the residence duration of migrants at a certain point in time. Many short-term migrants may have already left by the time of measurement, while long-term migrants remain, leading to their over-representation in the outcomes. Qualitative studies may also be subject to bias, particularly when based on small selective samples. For instance, Ryan (2018, 2019) interviewed Polish migrants who had lived in the UK for 10 years or more and found a clear preference for long-term settlement – probably because those with shorter-term residence intentions had left already. A potential solution to this 'point-in-time' approach is cohort studies, which track a cohort of migrants during a certain period. We identified only three studies, all in the Netherlands, that used this cohort approach to estimate the duration of residence of CEE and EU-migrants in the Netherlands (including the previously cited study of Strockmeijer *et al.* 2019; see also Loomans 2023; Manting, Kleinepier and Lennartz 2022). To conclude, both quantitative and qualitative studies face selectivity bias: focusing on migrants present in a country (or city) at a specific point in time will inevitably yield more evidence of longer-term residence than short-term stays.

After selecting the relevant qualitative and quantitative articles, we undertook a two-stage analysis approach. Initially, we systematically examined the chosen studies along a continuum spanning from temporariness to settlement, elucidating three migration patterns. Subsequently, in the second phase, we conducted an in-depth analysis of these three patterns, with a focus on the characteristics and motives of the labour migrants involved and the institutional factors influencing and fostering these patterns. This analysis led to the further conceptual grounding and clarification of three archetypical patterns: settlement, migration by choice and trapped in liquid migration. Due to space constraints, we cannot discuss every relevant article in relation to the three patterns. Instead, we selectively highlight studies whose findings reflect core insights shared across multiple investigations. The studies were selected based on their thematic relevance, empirical strength and contribution to understanding variation within and between the identified patterns.

CEE migration: settlement or lasting temporariness?

This section presents an overview of empirical studies on the migratory behaviour of CEE migrants, revealing different outcomes. We distinguish three different migration patterns. Some studies suggest that 'lasting temporariness' is a temporary phase that will eventually result in permanent settlement. However, other studies highlight enduring temporary migration patterns, either as a choice for flexibility or because migrants are trapped in temporary migration because of the lack of resources necessary for permanent settlement.

Settlement migration

Various qualitative studies highlight that CEE labour migrants in the 'old' EU countries often eventually settle in the host country rather than engage in temporary or circular migration. Friberg (2012), in his study on Polish labour migrants in Norway, distinguishes three stages in migration processes: an initial stage of temporary work abroad, followed by open-ended transnational commuting, which often results in permanent settlement. According to Friberg, liquid migration is merely a transitional stage in the new migration dynamic in Europe, during which most CEE migrants had flexible, mostly low-paid, jobs. When these jobs ended, the migrants 'without income, housing or access to unemployment benefits, (...) have little option but to return' (Friberg 2012: 1602). In the second stage, Friberg describes a condition of 'permanent temporariness' and 'transnational commuting', where migrants profit from the high wages in Norway while benefiting from the low costs of living in Poland. However, the strain of family separation leads many to bring their families over, ultimately choosing to settle in Norway (Friberg 2012: 1602).

Bygnes and Erdal (2017), in another study on Polish labour migrants in Norway, found that most research participants preferred what they termed a 'grounded life' in Norway. The migrants '...either had a strong desire to stay in Norway or found themselves in circumstances where prospects for return faded a little more with each year spent in Norway' (Bygnes and Erdal 2017: 110). However, they also noted that some research participants either preferred the 'liquid conditions' of temporary or circular mobility or lacked the necessary resources – such as stable employment and adequate housing – for permanent or long-term settlement in Norway. The latter group appeared to be trapped in a state of liquid migration (Bygnes and Erdal 2017). Ultimately, the authors distinguished two groups among their interviewees: those who are settled in Norway – often with partners and children – and those who work in Norway, while their families remain in Poland and who are more or less satisfied with their 'transnational commuting'.

Ryan (2018, 2019) identified a clear preference for long-term or permanent settlement among the Polish migrants in the UK whom she interviewed. She found that most of her interviewees initially arrived in the UK with short-term migration intentions: 'The mantra of coming "for a year" was common amongst both Irish and Polish migrants' (2019: 181). However, over time their migration intentions shifted: '...moving along a sliding scale from initial, temporary, short-term goals to longer term settlement...' (2019: 184). Factors such as having a professional career in the UK, a stable relationship – particularly with British partners – and/or children contributes to the desire to settle. Skilled Polish participants feared fewer career opportunities if they returned, as the skills and qualifications acquired in the UK were '...not easily transportable back to the country of origin' (Ryan 2019: 186). However, as she acknowledges, these findings may have been affected by the selective sample of highly skilled interviewees who had lived in the UK for at least 10 years. The aspect of settlement and the desire to

lead a stable life also feature prominently in Pszczółkowska's (2024) study. She conducted 73 interviews with Polish respondents located in various parts of Ireland, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. Most respondents, particularly those in the UK and Ireland, had been living in these countries for more than five years and most were highly skilled migrants. Her respondents had no immediate plans to move because of the 'solid life' they had gained through migration.

One intriguing question concerning the UK is what impact the 2016 Brexit referendum had on the settlement aspirations of CEE migrants in the UK. The UK was a main destination for CEE migrants after the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007. At the same time, mass immigration – framed as 'taking back control of our borders' – was a central issue in the Brexit campaign. From the perspective of liquid migration, one might expect that the weaker legal position of EU migrants in the UK post-Brexit would result in a mass departure of CEE migrants from the UK (Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska 2020). Contrary to this expectation, Brexit did not trigger a 'Brexodus' (Guma and Jones 2019; Jancewicz *et al.* 2020; Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2018; McGhee *et al.* 2017). Instead, many CEE migrants in the UK opted to formalise their stay by applying for permanent residence or UK citizenship rather than leaving. Jancewicz *et al.* (2020) found that Brexit had little impact on the residence intentions of most long-term Polish migrants they interviewed. In some cases, it even motivated these latter to extend their stay in the UK. Similarly, Markova and King (2022) found that about half of their respondents preferred to stay in post-Brexit UK, while the other half considered leaving. Ultimately, Brexit did not result in a mass departure of CEE migrants from the UK. As Kilkey and Ryan (2021: 245–246) observe: 'Having lived in London for several years, they had invested too much to leave. For most, going back to Poland was not a viable financial option. With children in local schools and partners in local jobs, moving to a third country was usually not an option either'.

There are also several quantitative studies on the migration duration of CEE labour migrants. Earlier, we pointed out two limitations of these quantitative studies and statistical evidence: the issue of non-(de)registration in population registers and the problem of selectivity. Strockmeijer *et al.* (2019) addressed both issues by using data from employment registers instead of population registers and by adopting a cohort approach. Their study tracked formally employed CEE labour migrants in the Netherlands over a period of five years (2010–2025). The objective of their study was to assess how many of the formally employed CEE labour migrants in the Netherlands could be labelled as either short-term or long-term migrants. Migrants were labelled as 'settlement migrants' if they worked for at least seven months per year and had registered with the municipality. At the start of their research, in 2010, this applied to 43 per cent of all formally employed CEE migrant workers in the Netherlands. However, five years later, only three-quarters of them were still present and were also still employed. The authors assume that the others had, meanwhile, left the country, rather than thinking that they are still present but no longer employed (not working or self-employed). Overall, they conclude that '...a third of the labour migrants from Central and Eastern Member States can be characterised as settlement migrants after being in the Netherlands for more than five years. They spend most of the year working in the Netherlands and continue to do so in the subsequent years' (Strockmeijer *et al.* 2019: 2444).

Another Dutch cohort study by Manting *et al.* (2022) followed seven groups of EU migrants (including from Poland and Bulgaria) in the Netherlands over a 7-year period, from 2012 to 2019. Their study used data from population registers, which tend to overestimate the share of long-term migrants, since short-term migrants are less likely to register. Nonetheless, they found that '...more than half of all EU migrants stay in the Netherlands only for a short while – a couple of years only' (Manting *et al.* 2022: 1036). Polish migrants generally stay somewhat longer in the Netherlands compared to other migrant groups, such as those from Spain or the UK. In a similar cohort study, Moreh (2014) tracked Hungarian migrant

workers who arrived between 2007 and 2010 in England and Wales. One year later, in 2011, fewer than half of them were still present in the country; the rest had left. Moreh (2014: 88) concluded that this reflects a ‘...shift in mobility types, from a longer-term and more stable migration to a more “fluid”, “liquid”, “circulatory” type of mobility...’.

Kaczmarczyk and Massey (2019) argued that ethnosurvey data provide a more reliable picture of the settlement practices of migrants than (often incomplete) population register data. In our own study on Polish, Romanian and Bulgarian migrant workers in the Netherlands, based on ethnosurveys in 10 Dutch municipalities (n= 654), we found that about one in four interviewees can be characterised as ‘settlers’. These respondents often had regular and permanent work, spoke Dutch and had Dutch friends – but were less attached to their home country. Other migrant categories in our study, such as circular and transnational migrants, were less likely to stay for longer periods of time. They either commuted between the origin country and the Netherlands on a regular basis or they intended to migrate to other countries as well (Engbersen *et al.* 2013). In a follow-up study, in which we contacted our previous respondents three years later (in 2013), we found that the share of ‘settlers’ increased to about half of all interviewees we could trace (38 persons of a total of 75): they were still present in the Netherlands and intended to stay at length (Engbersen *et al.* 2017: 343). After three years, more migrants had decided to settle permanently than they had initially intended. In a similar study, Šūpule (2021) conducted a quantitative analysis of survey data (n=1391) on Baltic labour migrants in several Nordic countries. The findings revealed that, as in the original Dutch study, about one in four respondents can be categorised as ‘settlers’.

In conclusion, we identified several quantitative and qualitative studies examining the settlement intentions and practices of CEE migrant workers in the ‘old’ EU countries. Various qualitative studies on CEE migrants in countries such as Norway and the UK challenge the concept of liquid migration. A common finding is that interviewees initially intended to stay for a short period but ultimately extended their residence. For these migrants, temporary migration often serves as a first step to more permanent settlement (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Friberg 2012; Ryan 2018, 2019; Pszczółkowska 2024). However, this outcome may be influenced by the over-representation of long-term residents among the interviewees. Even Brexit, which disrupted the residence rights of EU migrants in the UK, did not result in a ‘Brexodus’. Instead, many CEE migrants tried to formalise their UK residence instead of leaving (Guma and Jones 2019; Jancewicz *et al.* 2020; Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Lulle *et al.* 2018; McGhee *et al.* 2017). In general, one could say that settlement migrants often have somewhat higher incomes and more stable employment positions (Strockmeier *et al.* 2019: 2443). However, as Bygnes and Erdal (2017) observe, others lack the resources needed to settle, such as stable employment and adequate housing; these individuals seem to be trapped in liquid migration, a category which we explore later in this article.

We have discussed the limitations of quantitative studies on migration durations, as these studies tend to overestimate the share of long-term migration for various reasons. Nevertheless, the available research indicates that only about a quarter to a half (at most) of all CEE migrants can be characterised as settlement migrants. The others either did not intend or were unable to settle – and left the host country within a relatively short period (Engbersen *et al.* 2013, 2017; Manting *et al.* 2022; Moreh 2014; Strockmeijer *et al.*, 2019; Šūpule 2021). As Manting *et al.* (2022: 1036) concluded, after tracking various EU migrant groups in the Netherlands over a 7-year period: ‘...more than half of all EU migrants stay in the Netherlands only for a short while – a couple of years only’ (...). The temporary nature of these migration patterns are explored in the remainder of this article.

Temporariness 'by choice'

We identify two types of temporary migrants. On the one hand, there are those who deliberately choose temporary migration, preferring to live and work in the destination country for a limited time only or even simultaneously in multiple countries, thus embracing a transnational lifestyle. On the other hand, there are those who may prefer to settle in the host country but lack the resources – such as stable employment and adequate accommodation – to do so. In this section, we focus on migrants who deliberately chose temporary migration. Due to the scarcity of quantitative data on the prevalence of both categories, we primarily rely on qualitative studies.

One illustrative example of 'temporariness by choice' is those known as the 'searchers', as described by Eade *et al.* (2006). They are '...predominantly young, individualistic and ambitious migrants. They occupy a range of occupational positions from low earning to highly skilled and professional jobs' (Eade *et al.* 2006: 11). They keep their options open; they may pursue a career in London but they may also move elsewhere or return to Poland when the economic situation improves. According to Eade *et al.* (2006), about 40 per cent of the Polish migrants in London can be characterised as 'searchers'. In a similar study, Moreh (2014: 100) found that 'a majority' of his interviewees, Hungarian migrants in the UK, were 'searchers'.

A comparable category in our own research consists of 'bi-national' or 'transnational' migrants. They have strong economic and social attachments to both the Dutch host country and their countries of origin. Although they generally have higher incomes than other CEE migrants, they spend less money on remittances. They are acquainted with native Dutch residents but also visit their home countries more often than settlement migrants. They are also less likely to stay in the Netherlands for more than five years compared to the settlement migrants in our sample. In our original study, almost 20 per cent of the respondents were identified as 'transnationals'. In our follow up-study, three years later, the share of 'transnationals' in our sample was about the same (Engbersen *et al.* 2013: 971, 2017: 343). The already cited similar study on Baltic labour migrants in Nordic countries found that 28 per cent of them could be classified as 'transnationals'. These migrants are often students or higher-skilled workers, although they often had low-skilled work. Their primary motive for migration is personal development and they do not intend to return to the home country within five years (Šūpule 2021: 136).

Several studies on European youth mobility, notably by King and Lulle and their colleagues, offer examples of temporariness by choice. These studies examine migration from various CEE countries, including the Baltic countries, to the UK. Prior to Brexit, the UK – especially London – was an attractive 'escalator region' for young, highly skilled and ambitious CEE migrants (King *et al.* 2018; Lulle *et al.* 2018). One key research question relates to the prospects of these young migrants: will they remain in the UK, return home or go elsewhere? In this context, the authors explore the concept of liquid migration (King 2018; King *et al.* 2018; Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2022). Their study on young Baltic migrants in the UK reveals that '...for most interviewees there was huge uncertainty and ambiguity about the future. (...) What we found (...) was a rather widespread intentional unpredictability about the future...' (King *et al.* 2018: 294). As the authors argue, this reflects '...the migratory habitus of this "new generation" of intra-European migrants'. This flexible attitude is partly attributed to the young age and lifestyle of their interviewees. In contrast, older migrants with professional careers and/or families with children generally tend to seek more certainty in their migration decisions. Another factor influencing this fluidity is the reversibility of return migration within the EU. Prior to Brexit, migrants always had the option of a 'second return' to the UK after a disappointing return migration. The authors conclude: 'Hence, our evidence on the future perspectives of these migrations and migrants is fully consistent with

the fluid open-endedness of “liquid migration” ...’ (2018: 297). Another study within the same project distinguishes three types of migrant: planners, dreamers and accidental migrants. According to the authors, the latter category, in which the highly skilled are over-represented, resembles what we refer to as liquid migration: ‘The accidental migrants moved spontaneously and for adventure and were often influenced by the decisions of others, as they were willing to just move and see what comes next. Their decision-making matches best the “liquid” migration framework, which stresses the European free movement regime as an enabler for flexibility and unpredictability in young people’s lives lived across borders’ (Koikkalainen *et al.*, 2022: 12).

Another study that exemplifies temporariness by choice focuses on young and highly skilled Estonian migrants in London. Saar and Saar (2020: 54) note that migration to ‘escalator regions’ such as London is ‘...often (...) just temporary and used for career advancement’. However, their interviewees did not migrate primarily for economic reasons but for personal development. They see London as a place with great economic opportunities, while also valuing ‘...the city’s possibilities of diversity, culture and entertainment...’ (2020: 58). Yet, London is not where they want to settle. It is viewed as ‘a passage of life’, followed by an intention to return to Estonia to start a family: ‘In this context, Estonia was described as a safer and a better place for children...’ (2020: 59). A Latvian study, based on a subset of data from a comprehensive web survey targeting Latvian migrants residing in the UK, Germany and other EU countries, highlights a significant contrast between highly skilled Latvians educated within their home country and international students, termed as global graduates, who pursued their education abroad (Kasa 2023). This study revealed that the former group tended to adopt a more settled lifestyle, whereas the latter embraced a more fluid lifestyle characterised by multiple migrations.

Ciobanu (2015) explores the phenomenon of multiple migrations among mainly (higher) skilled migrants from Romania, analysing how their migratory patterns often involve multiple moves between countries. Her interviewees, Romanians mainly residing in the greater area of Lisbon in Portugal, had often lived in other European countries or worked abroad while their families remained in Portugal. Many had family members residing in other European countries as well. Ciobanu (2015: 467) argues that ‘(...) the concept of liquid migration characterises the increasing diversity in migration patterns throughout Europe’ but it does not acknowledge the phenomenon of multiple migrations which she describes in her study. Where Romanian workers go is mainly determined by three factors: transnational social networks that ‘open doors’ in other countries, evolving migration policies for Romanians in Europe and economic opportunities. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Romanian migrants mainly moved to Southern European countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal, benefiting from regularisation policies in these countries that granted regular status to non-EU citizens. However, after Romania (and Bulgaria) joined the EU in 2007 and especially after all EU countries opened their labour markets for Romanians and Bulgarians in 2014, many Romanians migrated to countries such as Belgium, Ireland, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands, attracted by the higher wages in these countries and the decreasing availability of jobs in Portugal. Germany became a major destination for Romanians (Ciobanu 2015: 482; cf. Sandu 2017; Voivozeanu 2019). These studies show how the migration decisions of CEE migrants are affected by changes in the institutional context of migration.

However, temporariness by choice is not limited to the young, adventurous and higher-skilled. Medium- and lower-skilled CEE workers also take advantage of the opportunities offered by the open European labour market. A Latvian study – based on a survey of more than 6,000 Latvian emigrants and 15 in-depth interviews with internationally mobile global talents – concludes that studies on liquid migration should pay more attention to blue-collar workers such as builders, welders, machine operators and others: ‘Even without a high level of formal education, they are in high demand

internationally and nowadays constitute a significant share of the transnational and global nomads' (Mierîna and Laudere 2023: 1703).

Additionally, a substantial body of economic-demographic literature, based largely on labour-market and ethno-surveys, examines temporary and circular migration from Central Europe, particularly from Poland. Okólski (2001, 2012) introduced the concept of 'incomplete migration', which pertains to the circular and temporary migration patterns of low-skilled workers from peripheral Polish regions before EU enlargement, in which they left their families behind. For these individuals, migrating abroad was a survival strategy (Kaczmarczyk *et al.* 2020). Since 2004, however, migration from Poland to Western Europe has involved relatively younger and better-educated migrants. Nevertheless, lower-skilled workers still represent the largest group (in absolute terms) and, for many, temporary and circular migration remains a relevant option (Fihel and Kaczmarczyk 2023). The relatively higher minimum wages make precarious, flexible and temporary jobs attractive, leading lower-skilled workers to actively seek these roles in more prosperous EU countries (ILO 2024). Early post-accession studies have referred to some of these workers as 'target earners' or 'hamsters' who return home after a certain period, while others maintain a more circular existence, particularly in agriculture and horticulture.

In conclusion, we found that a substantial number of CEE labour migrants are (still) engaged in temporary migration patterns. Some of them are classified as 'searchers', 'global graduates', 'global nomads', 'transnationals', 'bi-nationals' and 'accidental migrants', who are open for career opportunities in several countries and are willing to move from one country to another (Eade *et al.* 2006; Engbersen *et al.* 2013; Kasa 2023; Šūpule 2021). In general, those who opt for flexible 'liquidity' are either younger or better positioned – or both. Many of them do not migrate primarily for economic reasons but for personal development and to experience the culture and diversity in other European countries. On the other hand, temporariness by choice is not just something for the young, adventurous or highly skilled. Medium- and lower-skilled workers from Central and Eastern Europe also take advantage of the opportunities created by EU enlargement.

Trapped in liquid migration

Alongside migrants who deliberately choose temporariness, there are also those who – as Bygnes and Erdal (2017: 105) observe – are 'trapped in liquid migration' (cf. Erdal and Oeppen 2022). Settling in a host country, particularly when migrants want to take their families, requires certain conditions and resources in terms of economic certainty, sufficient income, adequate housing and, preferably, access to social security. However, as numerous studies show, many CEE labour migrants in the 'old' EU countries are often unable to meet these conditions. They hold low-skilled and uncertain temporary jobs, live in shared accommodation and have no or only limited access to social security and other welfare-state services (Loomans 2023). These are not the conditions in which to settle in a host country and have your family come over. For many labour migrants, these harsh conditions are important reasons for choosing the strategy of becoming a target earner or circular migrant, while others feel primarily trapped in liquid migration.

Two subcategories of CEE migrant workers, in particular, appear to be unable to settle permanently in the host country: employees from temporary work agencies (TWAs) and so-called 'posted workers'. CEE migrant workers, particularly in the Netherlands and the UK, are often not directly employed by employers in the host countries but by TWAs. Dutch studies estimate that between 25 and no less than 60 per cent of all Polish migrant workers in the Netherlands are employed by a TWA while in the UK, between 40 to 50 per cent of all CEE labour migrants are estimated to work for one (Been and de Beer

2022; Strockmeijer 2020: 36). As Strockmeijer (2020: 42–43) shows, CEE labour migrants in the Netherlands, particularly those employed by TWAs, more often have lower wages and temporary labour contracts than native Dutch workers or workers with another migration background. TWAs often offer ‘all-inclusive’ package deals for migrant workers: not only work but also housing, insurance and transport (both from the sending to the host country and daily commuting to work). As Been and de Beer (2022: 177) argue, these ‘...practices increase labour migrants’ dependency on the temporary work agency, which makes it less likely they will object to malpractices and thereby increases the risks of underpayment and exploitation’. A Dutch Parliamentary Commission reported how employers and TWAs try to make maximum profit from their foreign workers. They do so by economising on housing costs – providing inferior housing (often shared accommodation) for high rents – and charging high costs for transport. Some employers take advantage by bluntly underpaying foreign workers and not paying overtime and/or holiday pay (Commission Roemer 2020: 14)

Posted workers are another category of migrants who are not in the position of long-term or permanent settlement. Posted work allows companies in one EU country to employ workers temporarily in another while retaining the social-security rights of the sending country. This structure, rooted in the EU’s freedom to provide services, brings significant risks for posted workers in labour-intensive sectors (Advisory Council on Migration 2024). As posted workers are formally employed by employers or TWAs in the sending country, they participate in the social-insurance programmes and work under the conditions and norms of the sending country. This has significant competitive advantages for their employers, particularly when CEE workers are posted in more-advanced welfare states in Western and Northern Europe (Arnholtz and Lillie 2023). Posted workers generally work abroad for short periods of time and return home when the job is done; Arnholtz and Lillie (2023) speak of ‘workers’ hypermobility’. The temporariness of the job and their short stay in the host country ensures that workers generally comply to inferior working conditions. Their dependence on their employers for transportation, housing and other services limits their ability to demand better working conditions and higher wages. Their short stay also obstructs contacts with the authorities, trade unions and regular co-workers; in short, their isolated position also obstructs their opportunities to improve their working conditions. All this often results in precarious work and sometimes in outright labour exploitation (Arnholtz and Lillie 2023; Velizarova and Kirov 2018; Voivozeanu 2019).

What posted workers and foreign employees from TWAs also have in common is that they are often housed in shared accommodation. Manting *et al.* (2022: 1036) found that almost two-thirds of the seven groups of EU migrants in the Netherlands (not only migrant workers but also family migrants and foreign students) live in shared accommodation after arrival. Although shared housing is often seen as an ‘in-between phase’, Manting *et al.* (2022: 1041) found that ‘...a sizeable group of EU migrants tended to remain in shared housing on a more long-term basis (...) This is most likely related to their more precarious labour market positions’. Migrants from Poland and Bulgaria more often live in what the authors call ‘long-term sharing’ than other (Western European) migrant groups. However, they also found that Polish migrants have more than average access to social housing, which is highly restricted in the Netherlands. This shows that Polish migrants in the Netherlands tend to reside longer in the Netherlands and are better integrated in the system than other EU migrants.

To summarise, many CEE migrant workers – in particular posted workers and employees from TWAs – experience under-payment, inferior working conditions, high costs for housing and transportation and limited job certainty. Moreover, many of them are housed in shared accommodation – often in shared bedrooms. As a result of all this, CEE migrant workers who may want to settle in their host countries are unable to meet the conditions for settlement – in terms of fixed employment and adequate housing – to

do so. They seem to be trapped in liquid migration. All of this raises the question as to why CEE migrants accept this under-payment and these uncertain and inferior working conditions. The answer is relatively simple: the wages and working conditions in their home countries are generally even worse. As Voivozeanu (2019: 93) reports from interviews with Romanian migrant workers in Germany: 'In Romania one earns very little in comparison to what one earns here [in Germany]. This is why I am here. Otherwise, I would have been near my family... I would have been in Romania, and I would have carried on my life instead of drudging here'. CEE migrant workers often remain in low-skilled, low-paid jobs due to structural constraints such as the non-recognition of qualifications, language barriers, an insecure legal status and a reliance on social networks that channel them into precarious work. Those employed through temporary agencies or as posted workers face particularly limited opportunities for labour-market mobility. While some accept poor conditions in the hope of gaining upward mobility – the so-called 'immigrant bargain' (Alba and Foner 2015) – this prospect often fails to materialise, leaving them effectively trapped in liquid migration. A recent study on Romanian returnees adds another dimension to this discussion. It shows that many Romanian returnees are reluctant to re-migrate to other EU countries due to prior migration experiences with precarious work, marginalisation and social isolation. Given these negative experiences, they prefer to stay in Romania. According to the authors, this shows 'the temporal limits of liquid migration' (Moroşanu and Şerban 2025: 3).

Concluding discussion

The enlargements of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 have intensified labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe, sparking extensive research on these emerging patterns, one of which is encapsulated in the concept of liquid migration. This concept has received mixed evaluations and critiques – in particular, that liquid migration overemphasises the transitory and voluntary nature of CEE migration. In this paper, we have shown that migration from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe can, indeed, lead to permanent settlement. It is difficult to determine precise figures but the studies we analysed suggest that between a quarter and (at most) a half of labour migrants eventually settle long-term. The remainder stay only temporarily, ranging from a few months to several years. However, some studies may overstate the extent of settlement, due to selective sampling and a focus on formally registered migrants.

Alongside settlement migration, two subtypes of liquid migration are identified in this paper: 'temporariness by choice' and 'trapped in liquid migration'. The former includes both higher-educated and lower-skilled migrants. UK-based studies frequently feature highly educated migrants, emphasising narratives of personal growth and lifestyle migration, though many work below their qualifications, especially in hospitality. London has long been a key destination, a trend now in decline post-Brexit. Other studies highlight lower-skilled migrants who deliberately opt for temporary labour migration following the opportunities provided by changes in the institutional context in Europe since the early 2000s. They are concentrated in sectors like construction, transport, distribution, agriculture, horticulture and the meat industry. While some are 'target earners' aiming for financial goals before returning home, others exhibit circular migration, particularly in agricultural roles. These patterns demonstrate that more-traditional forms of seasonal and circular labour migration continue to coexist with newer forms of intra-EU mobility.

A fine line separates this lower-skilled group – who choose non-settlement – compared to those who are trapped in liquid migration, who aspire to settle yet face structural barriers. Engaged in similar sectors as those opting for a liquid life, these migrants rely heavily on secondary labour markets

facilitated by migrant networks, international recruitment agencies and ‘posted worker’ arrangements. Despite their efforts, they struggle to attain stable employment, an adequate income or suitable housing, which undermines their prospects for settlement. These migrants accept low wages and poor conditions because they are still better off than those in their home countries, leaving them trapped in liquid migration. This situation shows how being trapped in liquidity is strongly related to the vulnerable economic position of migrant workers, in particular their lack of access to stable employment, adequate housing and social security in the destination countries.

In this article, we paid limited attention to the differences between the various CEE countries, mainly due to the limited availability of comparative information in the studies on liquid migration that formed the basis of our analysis. Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that the labour-market positions of foreign workers from northern CEE countries (notably Poland and the Baltic states) tend to be more favourable than those of labour migrants from Romania and Bulgaria. Several factors may explain these differences. Labour migrants from Poland and the Baltic states generally arrived earlier in the EU destination countries, owing to the later accession to the EU of Romania and Poland and the (partly) different transitional arrangements that applied to them. Labour-market segmentation also plays a role. Danish research shows that Polish labour migrants in Denmark are more likely to work in industry, typically with somewhat higher wages, while Romanian labour migrants are more often employed in agriculture. However, the same research also shows that the wages of both groups are well below the Danish average (Felbo-Kolding and Leschke 2023). In addition, differences in human capital and experiences of stigmatisation – the latter especially with regards to Romanians and Bulgarians with a Roma background – may further contribute to the divergent employment and wage outcomes among migrant workers from different CEE sending countries.

Another important issue that received relatively little attention in our analysis concerns the future of CEE labour migration to Western and Northern Europe. We identify two trends that reduce both temporary and long-term labour migration from CEE countries. First, economic and demographic developments in the sending countries play a significant role. Wage differences between sending and destination countries are a crucial driver of migration. As countries like Poland experience rising economic prosperity and increasing wage levels, the incentive to work abroad is diminishing. This trend may further accentuate differences between CEE countries, as economic developments in countries such as Romania and Bulgaria continue to lag behind. Demographic shifts also contribute to declining labour migration. Ageing populations and the shrinking size of working-age cohorts (18–45 years) in CEE countries are likely to limit the scale of labour migration from these countries (Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy 2025). The effects of these processes are already visible in the Netherlands, through the increasing inflow of non-EU labour migrants from countries such as Belarus, Georgia, Moldavia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan – partly via (irregular) posted-worker arrangements (Heyma, Bussink and Vervliet 2022; Nederlandse Arbeidsinspectie 2025).

Second, some receiving countries are actively intending to reduce the demand for foreign workers by tightening regulations in economic sectors that heavily rely on cheap and temporary migrant labour. Germany, for instance, introduced stricter regulations for the meat industry with its many foreign and posted workers (Ban, Bohle and Naczyk 2022). A similar debate is unfolding in the Netherlands, where concerns are growing about certain economic sectors’ structural dependence on low-cost, temporary migrant labour through precarious arrangements – such as posting workers and fraudulent TWAs (Advisory Council on Migration 2024). These practices often result in migrants earning less than the legal minimum wage and being excluded from collective labour agreements. In response, policy measures such as enforcing collective labour agreements, high minimum wages and restrictions on

temporary contracts and self-employment could discourage these exploitative forms of temporary labour migration (Kremer, Went and Engbersen 2020). Although flexible and precarious employment may decline in sectors like meat-processing, the increasing reliance on third-country nationals – some originating from non-EU countries in Central Europe – working under (irregular) posted-worker arrangements, points to a persistent demand for cheap, temporary labour. This suggests that, rather than disappearing, some types of liquid migration are likely to endure, albeit in adapted or less-visible forms.

In addition to the limited attention we have paid in our analysis to differences between CEE workers from various countries and to the future of labour migration, there are two further limitations to the present study. Firstly, it focuses mainly on temporariness in relation to labour-market positions, leaving other dimensions of liquid migration underexplored. Secondly, it focuses on intra-EU East–West migration, even though the concept of liquid migration has also been applied to other migration corridors, such as South–North migration within Europe (Domínguez-Mujica and Díaz-Hernández 2019; Fernández-Suárez *et al.* 2024; Pratsinakis, King, Himmelstine and Mazzilli 2019) and to non-EU contexts (Abbaszadeh, Duran, Hir and Mohammadpour 2023; Azeredo 2023; Goñda 2024). Azeredo's (2023) study on Brazilian migration to Australia is the most detailed non-EU case application of the concept and we endorse his call for future research to apply the concept broadly in order 'to reach common grounds of universality and contest' (Azeredo 2023: 10).

Funding

Not applicable.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

AI use disclosure

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to improve the language and readability of this manuscript. The authors are responsible for all content.

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How to cite this article: Snel E., Engbersen G. (2026). Liquid Migration Revisited: Two Decades after the EU Enlargements of 2004 and 2007. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 15(1): 5–24.