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Micro and meso-regulatory spaces of labour mobility power: The role of ethnic and kinship networks in shaping work-related movements of post-2004 Central Eastern European migrants to the UK

Abstract

EU enlargement in 2004 produced a multi-layered regulatory space structuring labour mobility between Central Eastern Europe and the UK. Building on a critical revaluation of the concept of labour mobility power as a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to earnings' maximisation, the paper contends that while post-2004 migration was nested in the macro-regulatory mechanism of EU freedom of movement of labour, kinship and ethnic networks constituted additional layers in regulating migrants' mobility trajectories. Drawing on migratory biographies, the analysis examines how these regulatory mechanisms shaped migrants' actions and intentions related to transnational exit, contributed in creating linkages through which migrants sought to actualise their labour power on a transnational scale, and provided directions for labour mobility power's use within the receiving country. By embedding labour mobility power within kinship (micro) and ethnic (meso) networks, this paper offers a complimentary understanding of labour mobility power that takes it beyond the *homo economicus* explanatory model.

Key words: labour mobility power, EU labour migration, kinship networks, ethnic networks

Introduction

The scholarship of sociology of work maintains that labour mobility power can be conceived as the ability of workers to change jobs in a market capitalist economy (Smith, 2006). This form of mobility is beneficial both for firms and for workers: while for the former it allows them to attract new sources of labour, the benefits for workers relates to their ability to secure more preferable labour market outcomes and maximise their earnings (Smith, 2010). While in theory all workers can move around in a market capitalist economy, the situation is more multi-layered for transnational migrant workers because, unlike the case of national workers, the exercise of mobility power not only includes the search for preferable work opportunities in one country but also involves transnational exit. Applying this logic to a specific case of intra-EU labour mobility, Andrijasevic and Sacchetto (2016, p.222) have observed that EU migrant workers 'use mobility and temporariness to exit

unfavourable working and living conditions'. The macro-regulatory mechanism associated with EU freedom of movement of labour enabled workers to search for more attractive jobs within the EU labour market, as opposed to relying on job-switching in a single EU member state (Alberti, 2014), and allowed them to relocate to an EU member state that offered greater employment opportunities at a time of global economic recession (Mas Giralt, 2017). In the context of EU enlargement in 2004, the newly expanded mobility power potential allowed some Central Eastern European (CEE) migrant workers to triple their earnings by moving to the UK labour market (MacKenzie & Forde, 2009); in effect, CEE workers' use of mobility power corresponded to the characteristics attributed to migrant workers by neo-classical economics, which sees them as rational *homo economicus* seeking to maximise their earnings in international job markets (Massey, Durand & Malone, 2003). If understood in this way, the EU freedom of movement of labour macro-regulatory mechanism matched CEE workers' preference for a higher level of pay with the demand of UK employers and commercial labour market intermediaries for flexible labour (McCullum & Findlay, 2015).

While accepting that EU freedom of movement of labour played a key regulatory role in enabling CEE migrants to achieve higher earnings by moving to the UK, this paper seeks to reveal dimensions distinctive to the *homo economicus* oriented understanding of labour mobility power by locating it within micro and meso-regulatory mechanisms of kinship and ethnicity. MacKenzie and Martinez Lucio (2005) have argued that labour market participation is coordinated through the interplay of a panoply of socio-economic actors operating within a multilevel framework of regulatory spaces. This includes, *inter alia*, institutionalised labour market regulations (the macro-dimension), formalised meso-level relations associated with the activities of commercial labour market intermediaries, but also micro and meso-dimensions represented by informal relations that could be based on organised crime, patronage and, significantly for the arguments developed in this paper, kinship and ethnic networks. Historically, ethnic and kinship networks have been instrumental in facilitating migrants' accessing and switching jobs even when, as in the case of irregular migration, formal regulatory mechanisms would block it (MacKenzie & Martinez Lucio, 2019; MacKenzie, Ciupijus & Forde, 2019). In the context of this paper, EU freedom of movement of labour is associated with the macro-dimension, while kinship and ethnic networks constitute informal micro and meso-regulatory mechanisms respectively.

This paper begins by discussing the conceptualisation of labour mobility power developed within the sociology of work and exploring the manifestations of labour power in the context of CEE-UK migration. Subsequently, it draws on inter-disciplinary scholarship critiquing a *homo economicus*

oriented perspective on labour mobility power both on conceptual and empirical levels. It proceeds by exploring the biographical trajectories of a sample of CEE migrants interviewed in the North of England. It explores migrants' use of mobility power from three particular angles: the actions and intentions related to transnational exit, the experience of transnational relocation, and, finally, labour mobility practices in the destination country. The analysis will reveal that rather than following earnings' maximisation logic in-built into the *homo economicus* assumptions over the use of labour power, migrants' mobility power is being moulded within kinship and ethnicity networks across transnational social spaces.

Literature review: Taking labour mobility power beyond *homo economicus*

According to Smith's (2006) conceptualisation, labour mobility power is a capacity that allows workers to maximise their economic gains within the capitalist labour market. It manifests itself in workers' behaviour: workers search for and switch jobs to extract higher level of pay from employers. In contrast to collective actions associated with the involvement of organised labour, under which workers can seek to increase their earnings through such mechanisms as collective bargaining and strike action, mobility power is exercised on an individual level through exiting unfavourable employment relations (Smith, 2010). Smith (2006, p.390) asserts that the 'ability to change employers to overcome or escape a problem is special to capitalism as a political economy. Feudalism, slavery and state socialism limit the freedom of movement for labour to switch employers/owners at the will of the worker'. Labour market mobility practices vary among different groups of workers: for migrant workers – especially but not exclusively for those employed in low-wage sectors – kinship and ethnic networks are described as essential in navigating the labour market (Smith, 2010). While access to professional networks could be restricted due to discrimination or the lack of contacts with local workers and employers, migrant networks enable job search and change (Smith, 2010). On the other hand, while capitalist firms benefit from being able to recruit mobile labour, labour mobility power poses a constant challenge because of workers' readiness to quit and move to better-paid jobs. Thus, employers deploy various strategies to control the mobility power of migrants workers, e.g. by linking employment to housing provision, which makes it more difficult for workers to quit jobs (Smith & Pun, 2006).

It was been argued that the macro-regulatory mechanism of EU freedom of movement had a positive impact on those CEE workers who decided to relocate to the UK: the new EU citizens did not depend on state-issued work permits and/or employer sponsorship in entering and moving in the UK

labour market (Ciupijus, 2011). Moreover, unlike non-EU migrants, for post-2004 CEE labour migrants neither the level of skills nor the level of income acted as filters for labour market entry. This has been significant as skills could act as passports for mobility when it comes to migration to high income economies (Raghuram, 2008). Moreover, even if many of the post-2004 CEE migrants had to perform low-skilled and low-paid jobs in the UK (Favell, 2008), it offered them a possibility to earn significantly higher wages than in their countries of origin (Lulle, King, Dvorakova & Szkudlarek, 2019). While CEE migrants were exposed to high risks of unemployment associated with the economic recession in 2008, especially in such sectors as construction (Krings, Bober, Moriarty, Salamonska & Wickham, 2011), they could turn to searching for new jobs in the destination country's labour market, as opposed to opting for return migration (White, 2014).

Evidence from existing research suggests that the pattern of employment of CEE migrants in the UK was characterised by a significant degree of labour mobility. Hopkins, Dawson and Veliziotis (2016) observed that the experience of migration – which involved moving from one country to another within the EU – made CEE migrants less risk-averse in changing jobs and more ready, especially in the case of younger migrant workers, to switch employers in the UK. The fact that pre-migratory experiences of workers were shaped by low commitment employment relations in CEE countries – the characteristic attributed to the discontent over levels of pay and the weakness of trade union mechanisms in raising workers' wages (Meardi, 2016) – could also act as an additional factor encouraging frequent job switching in the destination country. On a sectoral level, Thompson, Newsome and Commander's (2013) study of the food-processing sector compared migrant mobility power to the power of the supermarkets in the supply chain: while supermarkets exercised market power by pitting different food processors again each other and establishing semi-monopoly power, EU migrant workers asserted their labour power by considering their relations to employers to be temporary and transient in nature. They stayed with firms as long as they deemed it beneficial financially for themselves, showing preparedness to change employers when it suited them.

The practice of using mobility power to change jobs could be seen both as an imperative for personal advancement and as a response to employers' inability to increase pay. The dissatisfaction felt over jobs post-migration, individual resourcefulness and high expectations could contribute to job changes and labour market moves (Shubin & Dickey, 2013). Wickham, Moriarty, Bobek and Salamonska's (2009) study of the Irish hospitality sector suggests that frequent job changes are used as a strategy to find more preferable forms of employment for CEE migrants. Frequently, the only way of moving upwards in an occupational hierarchy or/and increasing levels of pay is to move between different firms. Further evidence suggests that in low-skilled and low-paid jobs the practice

of movement is seen by CEE migrants as a response to the lack of career progression and the confinement of migrant workers to less well-paid jobs within already low-wage firms (Baxter-Reid, 2016).

While offering diverse and multi-angled insights related to labour mobility power, both general conceptualisations of labour mobility power (Smith, 2006) and specific studies of post-2004 CEE migration to the UK to a various degree reproduce the *homo economicus* related assumptions both on transnational and national levels: labour mobility tends to be seen as a relocation driven by wage differentials between CEE countries and the UK, regulated by EU freedom of movement of labour, and job switching within the UK labour market is associated with the relatively advantageous socio-legal status of EU migrant workers. Mobility is closely tied with earnings' maximisation strategies and while non-monetary motives are mentioned, the emphasis is still placed on the macro-regulatory context and pay maximising behaviours. From the point of view of this paper, such an approach has limitations that can be addressed through both conceptual and empirical critiques. On a conceptual level, new economics of migration (Stark, 1991) provide a critique of the *homo economicus* assumptions by focusing on the role of the household in risk-sharing: there is an explicit focus on inter-dependent relations among kin members, as opposed to individual-based earnings maximisation calculations in explaining migratory flows. It would also be important to distinguish between the assumptions of the macro-regulatory mechanism and migrants' actual behaviour: EU freedom of movement of labour could be compared to other migration policies that follow 'the blueprint laid down by neo-classical economic model' (McGovern, 2007, p.221) in which the intention to earn higher wages is seen as the main factor regulating mobility of migrants. However, as Ley (2003) has demonstrated, while the governance of labour migration creates policies conceiving mobile workers as *homo economicus*, the actual behaviour of migrants in the labour market does not fit expectations set by such macro-mechanisms. Moreover, the *homo economicus* oriented treatment of labour mobility power omits a vital link, mainly the processes taking place between leaving the country of origin and entering the labour market of the destination country: the concern over inputs and outputs determined by pull factors of higher wages obscures what happens in between, mainly how migrants experience transnational relocation and actualise their labour mobility power (Lindquist, Xiang & Yeoh, 2012). The latter is significant since migrants do not always secure employment upon entering the destination country: this process can be characterised by delays and reversals that further increases the need for migrants to be mobile to find paid work (Menjibar, 2000).

The *homo economicus* model of mobility power can also be contested on an empirical level. Cieslik (2011) argues that EU migrants' mobility decisions are not simply determined by considerations over wages but relate to social experiences of workplace and social life in the destination country more generally. Crucially for the argument developed in this paper, migrants' transnational job moves are rarely based on direct contacts with potential employers and specific pay offers; instead these are mediated by support stemming from ethnic and kinship networks (Sporton, 2013). Migrants can use social networking sites created by co-ethnics as a source of trustworthy information in relation to the ways specific employers treat workers: they would make their decisions not based simply on pay considerations but on the wider characteristics of the workplace (Janta & Ladkin, 2013). The type of jobs to which migrants move after establishing themselves in the destination country can be shaped to a greater extent by their ethnic links rather than calculations for achieving higher returns on their human capital: a migrant could find work within migrant networks and institutions catering to ethnic communities and see their work as a form of social commitment that outweighs purely pay-related considerations (Erel, 2010). Ciupijus, MacKenzie and Forde (2018) demonstrate that migrants' decisions to join trade unions could be explained not only as a strategy to increase bargaining power in the labour market and acquire English language skills, which would enable them to access better paid jobs, but as a way to connect and feel part of the ethnic community.

Drawing on inter-disciplinary critiques questioning the *homo economicus* oriented explanation of migrants' mobility, this paper offers a complimentary understanding of the workings of labour mobility power by embedding it within kinship (micro) and ethnic (meso) networks. While the macro-regulatory structure of EU freedom of movement of labour leads to migratory patterns that reflect the *homo economicus* model, the placement of mobility power within micro and meso-regulatory spaces moves the understanding of labour power beyond the push-pull framework based on the logic of earnings' maximisation.

Data analysis

The interactions between labour mobility power on one hand and kinship and ethnic networks on the other are examined through drawing on a small-scale qualitative data sample (with 13 participants). The data originates from semi-structured biographical interviews conducted with post-2004 CEE migrants in the UK. The interviews were conducted between August 2009 and April 2010 in two cities and one town in Yorkshire, Northern England. Snowball sampling was used to access participants. The breakdown of interview participants is as follows: four interviews involved two

members of a household, with both being present simultaneously for interview; another five interviews (four with men and one with a woman) were conducted with individual participants. The majority of participants (eleven in total) came from a Polish background. However, the conversations were also conducted with a Slovak national (an individual interview) and with a Russian-speaking Latvian woman (as part of a household interview). The interviews were conducted in Polish, Russian and English. While demographic features varied in terms of age (from late 20s to early 50s) and the sample composition was weighted towards Polish nationals, there was an underlying similarity unifying all participants: they were EU citizens who had migrated to the UK following EU enlargement. They shared the same socio-legal rights and their mobility took place under the particular structural circumstances created by the extension of EU freedom of movement of labour. Furthermore, there are broader socio-economic similarities that created outward labour migration from CEE countries to the UK after 2004, such as UK-CEE wage differentials and the willingness to exercise labour power via transnational exit (see Meardi, 2016). The inclusion of migrants coming from a particular region rather than from a specific nationality follows the precedent set by other studies exploring transnational migrant networks (Mas Giralt, 2017). Finally, while the temporal-spatial localisation of interviews imposed a nationally-bounded constraint – the interviews were conducted with migrants while they were residing and working in the UK at a particular moment in time, and no follow up, longitudinal interviews were conducted – the biographical nature of interviewing allowed for the understanding of how migrants placed their mobility power in distinctive transnational social spaces.

Based on Czarniawska (1998, p.6), who observed that 'a narrative is a mode of association, of putting different things together', these migratory biographies were transformed into narratives designed to reveal various manifestations of labour mobility power. Since Smith (2010, p.270) states that 'the idea of labour power as a flow evokes action and movement', narratives constructed by analysing biographical storytelling allows for the understanding of why and how migrants decide to exercise their mobility power. Crucially, migrant biographical stories demonstrate how their individual mobility was shaped by kinship and ethnic networks. Individual storytelling was the main unit of analysis: the focus was not on collective experiences of being a member of a particular ethnic community, but on how the mobility power of migrants interacts with emerging ethnic networks on an individual level. Moreover, the primary focus on mobility rather than on ethnicity per se justifies the inclusion of EU migrants coming from different nationalities. Finally, the aims of the analysis were also brought in line with what Burawoy (1991) described as an extended case study method in the social sciences: to use qualitative data to enrich and expand the understanding of existing concepts, in this case, the concept of labour mobility power.

The data was theoretically sampled and organised into three analytical categories that corresponded to migrant labour power's positioning in different transnational social spaces. The first analytical category relates to transitional exit and includes migrants' actions and intentions related to the change of countries of residence. While it covers the practice of exercising mobility power on a transnational scale, it also includes considerations over future international labour mobility or what Ley (2008, p.439) described as the 'vital social world of intention'. The second category represents a localisation of mobility power in the intermediary transnational space; the experience of leaving the country of origin and accessing the UK labour market. It allows treating the exercise of labour mobility power as a socially conditioned phenomenon: while the macro-regulatory regime conceives EU labour mobility as an atomistic movement of workers between the labour markets of the member states, the analysis reveals the mediatory role performed by kinship and ethnic networks between different national labour markets. Finally, the post-migratory deployment of mobility power within the destination country (the UK) constituted an additional angle of analysis. Diverging with the *homo economicus* model that tended to focus primarily on migrants' movement in the formal labour market in the destination country, this category included migrants' job-switching that involved informal work.

The starting point of all the biographical narratives was linked to the process of labour mobility created by EU enlargement in 2004 because it allowed narratives to be embedded in a particular regulatory landscape and also established a common denominator in examining the stories of different participants. While on a macro-level the experiences of labour mobility were nested in the regulatory regime that emerged after EU enlargement, the interpretive reading of narratives also pointed to the complimentary role performed by kinship and ethnic networks in producing regulatory spaces of post-2004 CEE-UK migration. Such positioning allowed the embedding of individual experiences within intermediate social structures: while the macro-structure of EU freedom of movement of labour constituted a formative background, the focus on kinship and ethnic networks led to the analysis of micro and meso-regulatory spaces of migration. The discussion of how kinship and ethnic networks condition the exercise of labour mobility power by post-2004 CEE migrants to the UK is examined in subsequent empirical sections in the following chronological order: labour mobility power and transnational exit decisions; the practice of transnational relocation between the country of origin and the UK; and post-migratory practices of labour mobility within the UK. All participant names were anonymised to protect their identities.

Labour mobility power beyond a single nation-state: The role of kinship networks in fostering mobility and transnational exit intentions

All interviewed participants moved to the UK following EU enlargement in 2004. Moreover, when referring to post-2004 migration as a collective experience, labour mobility was sometimes conceived in exclusively economic terms. One interviewee, Alina, was especially adamant about it: 'if not for the money, no one would come here'. From this angle, the act of migrating could be perceived solely as a response to wage differentials regulated by the macro-mechanism of EU freedom of movement of labour. However, on closer examination, while the possibility of earning higher wages within the enlarged EU constituted a decisive pull factor behind the decision to resort to transnational exit, it could not be seen as an obsolete explanation of migrants' mobility practices. Moreover, the analysis of migrants' actions and intentions would indicate that the exercise of mobility power did not have a linear and one-way direction but could involve migration to a different country and, potentially, return migration.

When it came to the initiation of transnational labour mobility in 2004, the UK would not have necessarily been the first destination for all interviewees. Krystyna described how, prior to moving to the UK, they tried out a temporary migratory move to Sweden:

> *There was a trip to Sweden; we travelled together with a group of friends to collect wild berries, it was kind of camping. We did not work for some kind of employer but just for ourselves: we would drive to forests, collect berries and next day would sell them… it was nice.*

This trajectory offers an insight for the following reason: it appears that Krystyna and her husband Tomasz did not base their mobility practices only on monetary calculations. While they sought to generate some income for household expenditure by collecting and selling wild berries, their joint migratory move to Sweden, which opened its labour market alongside the UK in 2004, was not aimed at maximising earnings but on spending time together. Their mobility was also underpinned by the network of their friends, which provided emotional and logistical support for the trip. After returning to Poland, they made a decision to move to the UK – when asked whether they did it for economic reasons alone, Krystyna answered by stressing a kinship aspect behind the decision to resort to transnational exit: 'we came to build our lives here'.

Conceiving one's exercise of labour mobility power in this way leads to an acknowledgement of the formative role played by kinship networks. To begin with, the impact of kinship networks manifested itself in the intention of preserving family unity: the ability of the closest kin members to live

together. When one of the partners moved to the UK for reasons of higher pay, a spouse would follow not simply because of shared intentions to achieve higher pay, but to avoid spatially splitting the family-based kinship network. As one interviewee, Małgosia, put it, she was in love and wanted to preserve the relationship. Karol was even more explicit in stressing the link between kinship networks and labour mobility:

> *The matrimonies collapse if one spouse remains in Poland. Besides, here in England, it is very rare to migrate and live on one's own. Economically it is unadvisable… It contrast, two people can double their level of income. Two individuals living together are spending less than individuals living separately…*

In line with the insights developed by new economics of migration (Stark, 1991), migratory decisions were not taken exclusively within the push-pull framework determined by cross-national wage differentials. Instead the exercise of mobility power was regulated by kinship networks that included both the intention to maximise gains from labour mobility but also a strong preference to preserve family ties. The use of mobility power by one member of the household would be followed by a chain migration of family members. Tadeusz spoke about how despite his education in medicine and hard work – as a manager in a Polish hospital – he could not earn enough to achieve a desired level of living and decided to move to the UK. This exercise of mobility power created separation between him and his wife and daughter, which led to emotional tensions. In the end, his wife Regina decided to join him:

> *Well, I came mostly because I was missing my husband unbearably, who came here simply in order to earn to feed the family. So, one day I just grabbed our daughter and came here.*

It is notable from the interviews that emotional obligations within kinship networks were particularly important for female interviewees. The decision to live in the UK was a result of the interplay between the use of mobility power and the sense of obligation originating within kinship networks. Such explicit embeddedness of labour power within kinship networks was not restricted to interpersonal relations between partners. In one home-based interview, it was noted that the garden was filled with children's toys: commenting on this, the interviewee, Jan, said that the possibility of allowing their children to enjoy greater material prosperity was the main factor in leading him and his wife to work in the UK. Furthermore, kinship obligations stemming from concerns for family members were not restricted to a particular age and did not simply emerge post-migration: for Karol, the upcoming wedding of his daughter acted as a specific factor for he and his wife's coming to the UK. According to Karol, the wedding was an expensive matter in Poland and as

parents they wanted their daughter to enjoy it as much as she could, thus they decided to use their mobility power and earn necessary funds by migrating to the UK. While the configuration of kinship-related motives within the migration process is different in Karol's case, there is a common theme shared with previous storylines: the dynamics of kinship networks intersect the ways in which the interviewed CEE migrants exercised their mobility power.

The extent and nature of pre-migratory embeddedness in kinship networks directly related to the decision to exercise mobility power via transnational exit. Prior to migration, Olgierd was unable to find stable work in Poland: he ended up working in the informal economy and was often denied his pay. His labour market position was complicated by the absence of kinship networks capable of providing support: in his girlfriend's words, in Poland a lot depended on personal and family-based connections in accessing jobs, which he was deprived of because he was an orphan. As a result, he could not 'see a future in Poland' for himself. On the other hand, the nature of migrants' insertion in kinship networks could contribute to migratory decisions as well. Alina, who followed her husband to the UK, said that:

> *My husband worked for a couple of years in my parents' company – they have a family business. He had enough of it; you can imagine how difficult relations within the family can be. He said that he needed to find something different…*

For Lech, finding something different meant migrating to the UK. Working for his wife's parents in a small business created a sense of dependency that was intolerable for him: although kinship networks provided a source of employment, tense interpersonal relations within the family created grounds for the exercise of mobility power.

The intentions over exercising a reverse transnational exit, that it is to return to their country of origin, was also connected to the dynamics of kinship networks, especially to the concerns over children's well-being. As Alfred put it:

> *I am thinking about our son finishing school here. If not for this issue, we can return to Poland any time.*

Another Polish couple who lived in the UK with a son who attended a secondary school said that they would only consider returning to Poland when their son finished school and had secured housing in the UK. Although they still framed their exercise of labour mobility power as earnings maximisation strategy – Alina said that their aim was to earn enough funds to establish a small family business in catering upon return to Poland – the timing of the move itself was connected to the dynamics within kinship networks. What is significant here is how migrants' intentions over the

use of transnational exit within the EU are linked to the considerations over kinship. While EU freedom of movement of labour may construct movements of EU migrant workers as 'temporary, opportunistic and circular' (Favell, 2008, p.711) – the features which have implicit *homo economicus* related connotations – the kinship-related considerations introduce different dynamics: rather than simply adjusting their mobility plans to earnings' maximisations, migrants tie it in with the well-being of their family members. Significantly, kinship networks are not static themselves – they can develop and evolve: for example, divorcee Jan met his new Latvian wife in the UK. This forging of new kinship ties led to trips to her homeland. This connection made Jan think about potentially moving to Latvia in the future:

It would be worthwhile to explore it, to show interest for it and maybe to settle there.

However, not everybody wished or could find a new partner with transnational links: Witold described himself as on 'old bachelor'. For him being single signified a greater ease in resorting to transnational exit once again – he mentioned thinking about moving to Australia or North America. It was notably his particular position within the kinship network associated with singlehood rather than the concern over earnings' maximisation that encouraged him to imagine new migratory destinations.

The discussion of the interplay between kinship networks and mobility power over the decision to exit a particular nation-state was important because it demonstrated that kinship networks were not only relevant as a resource in job searches in the destination country (Smith, 2010) but constituted a micro-regulatory mechanism that shaped decisions to exercise labour mobility power on a transnational scale. The processes discussed so far reflect the role played by micro-regulatory spaces in relation to the actions and intentions related to transnational exit. However, to actualise their mobility power, migrants first had to relocate to the destination country and enter its labour market. This brings the analysis towards the consideration of labour mobility power's positioning within a different transnational social space: the examination of what takes place between the departure from the country of origin and finding employment in the UK labour market.

The continuum of micro and meso-level mechanisms regulating access to the UK labour market

While EU enlargement transnationalised the labour mobility power potential of the new EU citizens by opening up the labour market of higher income economies such as the UK in principle, participants' testimonies show that in practice the realisation of this new mobility potential was in itself a complex social process. The analysis of their mobility practices suggests that far from

corresponding to a *homo economicus* image of the EU migrant worker who makes rational calculations over migration costs and secures employment based on their skills and employer demand, the experience of relocation and finding employment is a multi-faceted phenomenon that depends on a variety of mediating mechanisms. These mechanisms of realisation of labour mobility power could be mapped alongside a continuum, on the extreme end of which is the process of the migrant worker channelling to the UK labour market jobs via commercial labour market intermediaries, while the rest of the continuum is constituted through the presence of a variety of informal regulatory mechanisms associated with kinship and ethnic networks.

It would be possible for migrants to relocate by bypassing informal networks: for example, when asked how he came to the UK and whether he travelled with his family members, Witold said he came by using a commercial labour market intermediary:

> *It was June 2005. I arrived here with a group of Poles who also sought work. I arrived with people from all over Poland, not with my friends, but with people who sought work like I, because of economic reasons… I had everything being secured – home and work. I had much more than in Poland. Also I had basic rights guaranteed by the European Union.*

Arguably, this account bares clear resemblance to the unproblematic depiction of the migration process as the aggregate of inputs and outputs in which a higher wage-seeking migrant finds employment in the destination country, while the macro-regulatory mechanism of EU freedom of movement of labour acts as a guarantor in ensuring labour market rights. Following the *homo economicus* logic of EU freedom of movement of labour, Witold left for the UK having already secured a job offer and reasonable expectations of increasing his earnings. However, contrary to Witold's experiences, when it came to the process of actualising labour mobility power on a transnational scale, the experiences of all the other interviewees did not automatically reproduce the *homo economicus* model – they were shaped by informal micro and meso-networks in a variety of ways.

The kinship networks associated with family were essential in relocation and acted as a micro-regulatory mechanism: close family relatives already living in the UK would be cited by participants as individuals who would assist in finding work and accommodation for them upon arrival. Having a close family member living in the UK could also facilitate a gradual integration into the UK labour market on terms preferred by migrants. A Slovak interviewee, Vaclav, first settled with the family of his sister, who already lived in Sheffield: he was able to stay with her and take English language

classes before entering the labour market. Another interviewee, Krystyna, similarly used a family-based contact to settle in the UK:

> *We came here with the help of family – my cousin was already here. We called her and asked if we could come. My cousin agreed with her friend, who rented us a room in her flat. We later found the first job through the employment agency.*

In contradiction to the logic of EU freedom of movement of labour, Krystyna and her husband did not arrive in the UK with a specified job offer or clear information about where to find work. The relocation and labour market entry was regulated by a micro-regulatory mechanism represented by their kinship network: drawing on the relationship based on trust rather than on specific job offers promising higher pay, they migrated as a family, secured living arrangements, and obtained advice on a commercial labour market intermediary. While the EU macro mechanism created social-legal grounds for transnational use of mobility power, in practice migrants such as Krystyna executed it via their kinship network, which led to gradual inclusion in the labour market. For those migrants who did not have an established kinship network in the UK, a temporary separation acted as a transnational linking mechanism: a member of the household would first migrate on their own and when they felt that there was a job and suitable accommodation for both partners, the signal would be sent back home for a family member to follow. As Karol recalled:

> *My wife came here first and found a flat. I joined her after it – it is quite common among migrants like us: woman migrates first, and then is joined by man.*

Even when the gendered distribution of transnational relocation was different, the principle of actualising mobility potential via kinship networks remained the same: a partner would find accommodation and work, which allowed their spouse and children to follow. Even when participants relied on non-kinship support networks, such as labour market intermediaries, the bonds of kinship still framed the practice of labour mobility: Małgosia told how she and her partner Olgierd together searched in Poland for a trustworthy employment agency so that Olgierd could have a degree of certainty that he would find work upon arrival. Since this agency required an English language test, Małgosia, who knew English better, practiced some exercises with Olgierd to increase his self-confidence. While the commercial labour market intermediary was used in an instrumental way, inter-personal relations still played a role in identifying a suitable agency and intertwined with the process of relocation through a combination of linguistic, emotional and fact-checking support: the concerns during the relocation process were not solely over the financial costs related to travel and initial settlement arrangements or general earnings' expectations but would

relate to the subject of trustworthiness that was determined within kinship networks. In this light, Alberti's (2014) observation that migrants use the macro-mechanism of EU freedom of movement of labour in a strategic way while plotting their mobility plans can be expanded by stressing the role of kinship networks. The decision to exercise mobility power can be described as strategic, but it is not solely subjected to the criteria associated with the possession of EU rights and the quest for earnings' maximisation – it also involves inter-kinship verification of migratory routes.

The initiation of labour mobility via kinship networks was not solely restricted to the closest family members but involved friends too. Interviewees decided to migrate following the promises of their friends, who already lived in the UK, to help them in finding work. Alina and Lech's close friend Jan visited them in Poland for vacations and encouraged them to work in the UK, promising them to help them find employment with a recycling firm. While they trusted him, they also acted cautiously: they asked Jan to provide a phone number of a manager of the firm, called him and only after receiving personal assurances of work decided that it was safe to move. Such a cautious approach could be seen as a response to employment uncertainties: Jan himself was promised a job in a London store by friends, but on arrival the manager said that there were no job vacancies. He had to move to a Northern English town to work in a store owned by the same company. Upon arriving there, he established contacts with local Polish migrants who helped him with living arrangements. This exemplifies the central role that social networks built upon ethnic commonality play in regulating access to the labour market. It was particularly important when initial promises of work did not materialise. Irina described her experience in this way:

> *You want to know about my coming to England? It was a long story... A friend of mine encouraged me to go. So I had decided to go to an agency...*

She was promised work on a farm in Southern England by the agency she approached, but upon arrival she was only offered limited hours and insufficient levels of pay. In the end, she considered resorting to return migration, since in her own words she could 'earn more money in Latvia'. However, rather than returning to Latvia and following the trajectory expected by the *homo economicus* model after failing to secure higher earnings, she was persuaded by another friend of hers to travel to a Northern English town. Subsequently, with the help of her friend she managed to settle and find work. This further highlights the role of kinship and, increasingly, broader ethnic networks in regulating the realisation of labour mobility power by acting as support mechanisms and offering second chances for staying in the UK. The macro-regulatory mechanism of EU freedom of movement of labour in itself did not guarantee access to employment. The analysis highlights the importance of kinship and ethnic networks in constituting a segment in a continuum of regulatory

mechanisms facilitating relocation and access to employment: while the EU framework formed an overarching regulatory space that created a potential for the use of commercial labour market intermediaries, for most interviewees transnational mobility was complimented by another layer of a complex web consisting of micro and meso-regulatory mechanisms of kinship and ethnic networks, which moulded migrants' use of mobility power. The analysis demonstrates that the mobility power of migrants cannot be simply imagined as being reduced to inputs – the decision to migrate based on purely economic calculations – and outputs – the outcome of earning higher wages as a result of employment in the destination country. Finally, while kinship and ethnic networks are essential in understanding the transnational dimension of embodiment of labour mobility power, their regulatory role does not end upon migrants' entrance to the UK labour market but continues to shape migrants' mobility trajectories following their settlement.

Micro and meso-regulatory mechanisms of migrants' labour power in the UK: The processes of setting up vectors of labour mobility

While the securing of initial access to the UK labour market required migrants to engage in a variety of mobility practices, labour mobility continued to remain an integral part of migratory experience upon settlement in the UK. Mobility could be imposed involuntary: the 2008 economic recession led to job losses and forced some migrants to find alternative employment. For example, after losing a construction sector job, Tadeusz moved to work in a kitchen equipment manufacturing plant, not because it was an attractive option but because it was the first job he could find via a commercial labour market intermediary. While formal mechanisms could be used to move back into employment, informal kinship networks were also important since they offered emotional support and encouraged job search. For example, Krystyna indicated that when her husband Tomasz lost his job because of his company's bankruptcy, she was not as worried as she would have been in Poland. Her confidence was not irrational: he managed to find alternative employment soon after. As for migrants from Southern Europe at the time of the economic crisis in 2008 (Mas Giralt, 2017), the UK labour market offered greater opportunities for this study's participants to find employment after losing a job.

Significantly, when the threat of unemployment was reduced, migrants could think about planning to move to qualitatively different kinds of jobs. The relations within kinship networks could introduce a particular direction: e.g. while Tadeusz, who was a qualified nurse, preferred outdoor

work in the construction industry to work in hospitals, he started to take English language classes to meet the language requirements of the Royal College of Nurses. Not coincidentally, he made this decision with his wife Regina, a qualified midwife, who also chose to go through a similar process. This joint decision to take classes to re-enter their professions exemplifies how kinship networks intersect with labour mobility plans: partners discuss and agree among themselves how to use their labour mobility power. Regina also justified it by saying that they 'dreamt to return to work in their professions'. Although, in the short-term, it involved costs for language classes and re-accreditation, she felt that it would be better for them as a couple to choose this route. There was also another social factor that influenced their decision: for Regina, who worked as a cleaner for the local council, the manner of social interactions at work created a sense of unease (a sentiment echoed by her husband):

> *I feel like an alien in this environment. I am the only Polish woman among these English women who use vulgar language at work.*

What is important here is that the intention to switch jobs was explained not only by earnings maximisation calculations or as the preference to reverse post-migratory deskilling but by stressing that she and her husband needed to work in the environment closer to their normative expectations. While the type of behaviour found in a particular workplace combined with the absence of an ethnic support network within it could make kin members think about job-switching, the treatment of one's own ethnic group could also lead to an exit. For instance, Alina said that her and her husband's decision to leave a glass recycling plant was not simply explained by low wages but to frequent verbal abuse of Polish workers, as well as other migrants, by British supervisors. It was about being disrespected as a member of a particular ethnic community that led to the resignation and search of alternative ways to use their mobility power post-migration. In contrast, ethnic ties favourable to the preferences of kin members could lead to staying in a particular workplace. For example, Karol and his wife preferred to work overnight shifts because it allowed them to spend time together. They used a contact with a trustworthy Polish female manager working for an agency to find a position matching this work pattern – a clear overlap of kinship and broader ethnic networks. Significantly, the observed influence of migrant networks in this case suggests that such non-monetary concerns as the preoccupation of working together and a good relationship with a co-ethnic manager outweighed *homo economicus* related considerations over earnings' maximisation.

Other interviewees would resort to the use of ethnic networks when some other aspects of work were deemed undesirable, e.g. Jan referred to his experience in a discounted goods supermarket as

'utopian' because of long working hours. When he decided to opt for job-switching, he did not approach a local employment agency, which he described as being 'owned by an Englishman', even though this formal intermediary could have specified monetary information on potential jobs, but to fellow Polish migrants. His informants worked as security guards in the workplace he considered applying for and even though their advice was informal, it was more trustworthy for him. While instrumental in job searches, ethnic networks also underpinned migrants' ability to work in the jobs introduced by voluntary and statutory organisations to assist post-2004 CEE arrivals. In practice, it meant that working in these jobs required continuous interactions with ethnic networks. A Slovak interviewee, Vaclav, used his knowledge of Slovak, Czech, Polish and Russian to work as an interpreter for the local government. He would also interact with ethnic community groups, such as Slovak Roma, and assisted parents of post-2004 CEE arrivals in communicating with teachers. He stressed that this work allowed him to help the children of migrants who, without extra support, could face disadvantages in education. Another interviewee, Ludmiła, managed to move away from low-paid agency work to a professional job by becoming a mental health worker with the National Health Service. Her responsibilities specifically included working with post-2004 CEE migrant families. Moreover, while her work involved visiting Polish households and dealing with the problem of domestic violence, she also had to outreach to emerging Polish community. As she said:

> *If you want to get closer to the Poles, whether you want it or not, you need to establish a contact with the Catholic Church.*

The shared tradition of Catholicism would create Polish ethnic networks around this religious institution. To achieve good results in her work, Ludmiła maintained a working relationship with the Polish Catholic priest serving the local Polish community. In a similar vein, Marek, a union organizer of CEE migrant workers, who himself was recruited while working as a shelf-packer in the supermarket by the union, continued to maintain a close relationship with formal and informal Polish ethnic groups. There was also a kinship dimension: he also secured a job in the union for his partner, who came to join him from Poland and started to assist him in his new role. Moreover, when asked what attracted him most in working for the union, Marek pointed to his ability to help Polish migrants in their working lives. Notably, breaking with the *homo economicus*-oriented assumptions, neither Marek nor Vaclav nor Ludmiła mentioned higher income opportunities as the main reason of choosing to work in jobs designed to support fellow migrants.

Finally, while the *homo economicus* model tends to be associated with state-sanctioned forms of paid employment, micro and meso-regulatory mechanisms had an impact on mobility that stretched beyond the confines of the formal labour market. While some migrants could find work in formal

support groups, others followed more informal pathways. The broad dissatisfaction with their formal labour market jobs, as opposed to more specific concerns over pay, could lead to such mobility practice: as Alina put it, 'I was fed up working in the factories'. Similarly, Małgosia said that she 'did not want to work in some kind of call centre': it was not the level of pay, but the nature of work that led to her exit. Instead of searching for jobs within the formal labour market and treating pay as the main benchmark for job choice, Alina and Małgosia turned to home-based informal work, which still allowed them to generate income but even more importantly gave them a sense that they did something important for their ethnic group. Kinship and ethnic networks would enable this trajectory of labour mobility power. Małgosia decided to draw on her pre-migration English language degree and the demand for language learning among local Polish migrants:

> *Local Poles used to come to me to ask for translation help. I had enough of it but also thought that after all I am a qualified teacher so I could teach them. Now I have sixteen students: four doing group classes, the rest are being taught on an individual basis.*

Learners came via ethnic networks and took classes in the 'business room' that Małgosia set up in her house; the initial idea of hiring office space externally for teaching purposes proved too expensive. Alina sought to launch a Polish Sunday school, but some local migrants saw her plans as self-serving and believed that Alina wanted to benefit financially from them. She was adamant that it was not true – her initiative was about working within the Polish ethnic community rather than making as much money as possible for herself. In the end, Alina had to settle for a more modest project and became 'a telephone nanny', providing care for the children of post-2004 migrants. Her husband, who was an employee in a car bearings plant, also helped to drive migrants' children home. In the case of informal work, the availability of kinship and ethnic networks directed the use of labour power: when paid employment in the local labour market appeared unfulfilling personally, alternative arrangements were sought. These practices revealed how the relations within kinship networks and the demand within ethnic networks could shape the manner in which migrants made use of their mobility power. Moreover, while moving outside of the formal labour market carried risks of increased expenditure – as Małgosia's initial experience of renting private teaching space had revealed – and potentially could lead to the loss of income, for migrants like Alina and Małgosia this particular use of mobility power seemed logical because of their immersion within micro and meso-regulatory spaces of kinship and ethnicity. Overall, the regulatory role performed by ethnic and kinship networks in the UK led to a distinctive type of outcome, which a purely *homo economicus* oriented model of labour power would allow for.

Conclusions

This article has focused on the social embeddedness of labour mobility power in the context of post-2004 CEE migration to the UK. While locating post-2004 CEE migration to the UK within a particular macro-structural regime of EU freedom of movement of labour, this paper shows that kinship and ethnic networks alongside this macro-level migration policy have produced regulatory spaces shaping the mobility trajectories of migrants. If EU enlargement set up the socio-legal structure for post-2004 labour mobility between lower and higher income economies, these micro and meso-regulatory spaces created a social environment in which labour mobility was practiced. The framework adapted by this paper allowed the capture of the non-linearity of labour mobility power's trajectories across transnational social spaces. The interpretive readings of collected migrants' narratives points to an explicit deviation from the *homo economicus* related assumptions, which tend to link the exercise of labour mobility power to earnings' maximisation strategy (Massey, Durand & Melone, 2003). The regulatory role performed by micro (kinship) and meso (ethnic) level mechanisms follows a different logic when compared to the assumptions built into the macro-regulatory mechanism of EU freedom of movement of labour. Following the proposition of MacKenzie and Martinez Lucio (2019) over the dynamic nature of boundaries existing between multiple regulatory spaces, it could be argued that kinship and ethnic networks emerged following the expansion of the EU macro-regulatory mechanism, but at the same time maintained a degree of autonomy, which had a sufficient ability to shape labour mobility power in a way that deviated from the *homo economicus* model. In effect, kinship and ethnic networks could be compared to the nodes between which labour mobility power is forged and directed.

Several observations could be made about the role performed by kinship and ethnic networks in regulating labour mobility power. Micro-regulatory mechanisms related to kinship networks played a principal importance in transnational exit decisions: the dynamics within kinship networks affected migrants' decisions to live and work in the UK and introduced further complexities in mapping future mobility plans. The analysis of migrants' intentions and actions related to transnational exit through the prism of kinship networks allowed for the observation that the push-pull factors related to the *homo economicus* model are insufficient on their own to provide an account of the use of labour power on a transnational scale. Moreover, while the 'black box' conception of inputs and outputs inherent to the *homo economicus* model tends to ignore the processes taking place between leaving the country of origin and finding employment in the destination country (Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh, 2012), the analysis of this transnational dimension further illustrates that EU freedom of movement of labour is not the sole mechanism regulating post-2004 migratory flows between CEE and the UK.

Kinship and mobility networks performed a regulatory role that allowed migrants to accomplish transnational relocation and actualise their labour mobility power potential: these networks acted as mobility maps directing migrants to job opportunities and offered a back-up strategy in job searches.

In a similar vein challenging the *homo economicus* related assumptions, the analysis of the role performed by kinship and ethnic networks demonstrates that job-switching in the labour market of the destination country are not solely determined by a concern over increasing levels of pay. The interdependent relationship that exists between kinship and ethnic networks on one side and mobility power on the other influenced the choice of jobs, affected job-switching and allowed migrants to act successfully in professional jobs designed to offer services to other post-2004 CEE migrants. When formal labour market jobs were seen as undesirable in terms of broader personal preferences, as opposed to more narrow monetary calculations, mobility power could be channelled into informal work, which was in turn underpinned by kinship-level support and the emergence of the demand for particular services among post-2004 ethnic communities.

In the light of potential shifts in regulatory boundaries associated with Brexit – which, drawing on MacKenzie and Martinez Lucio (2019), could be interpreted as the nation state's attempt at re-establishing control mechanisms over the macro-regulatory space affecting the EU-UK mobility axis, and the appearance of signs that a new regulatory system will reinforce even more stringently the logic of the *homo economicus* model, e.g. the proposals of establishing earnings' threshold as a condition for the UK labour market entry (MAC, 2018) – future studies of UK-CEE migration could examine how micro and meso-regulatory spaces adjust in the context of a restructured macro-regulatory landscape and explore the forms in which these networks will continue to sustain the flow of labour. As the analysis suggests, ethnic and kinship networks created regulatory spaces that function in parallel with the macro-mechanism: the removal of the macro-mechanism of EU freedom of movement of labour would not automatically stop migratory flows. Thus, it would be important to consider to what extent the regulatory spaces created by ethnic and kinship networks will be able to shield mobility power of EU labour migrants *vis-à-vis* a potentially more restrictive UK-EU migratory regime. It could also examine how kinship networks are going to impact migrants' intentions and actions related to transnational exit: in the past, the worsening of economic conditions could lead to secondary migration to a different EU member state (Mas Giralt, 2017). While the nationalistic currents of Brexit created the sense of alienation among some EU citizens and raised concerns over their future in the UK (Gumma & Dafydd Jones, 2018), it remains to be seen how the downgrading of socio-legal rights, which could have a potential effect on entire families, will influence transnational exit actions of migrants.

Finally, while it was noted that access to EU citizenship rights created mobility differentials among migrants in the UK – e.g. mobile workers with EU rights had greater flexibility to plot their strategies both in national and transnational labour markets than non-EU migrants (Alberti, 2014) – post-Brexit mobility differentials could manifest in a different form: the separation between those EU migrants who would receive settled status and those who would be denied it - depending on the timing of their arrival or their employment status, could create new forms of stratification within ethnic and kinship networks. It may lead to a more hierarchical regulation of labour mobility power within these networks – the divisions stemming from different socio-legal rights – and in extreme cases could create greater opportunities for such illegal practices as human trafficking and bonded labour (Lewis, Dwyer, Hodkinson & Waite, 2015), which would stand in opposition to the principles of unconstrained job change and switching, according to which labour mobility power is expected to function in market capitalist economies.

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