

## Chapter 2

# Elusive Migration Systems: Shifting from Transnationalism to Transregionalism

Daniel Göler and Zaiga Krišjāne

**Abstract** The global financial and economic crisis as well as post-socialist transition means a similar general framework for socioeconomic and spatial development in different countries. Their migration systems react in different ways on such externally caused incidents, even in slightly comparable contexts. Consequences are, among others, increasing migrations and mutual interactions between sending and receiving countries as well as strong linkages of international migrations and internal migratory movements – phenomena we usually refer to as transnationalism. Against this backdrop, the aim of the paper is to stress the “regional element” of transnationalism. Thus, we suggest to broadening the concept of transnationalism with a new transregional perspective in order to strengthen the spatial issue in migration studies.

**Keywords** Migration • Migration system • Transnational social space • Transnationalism • Transregionalism

## 2.1 Concept and Methods

Basis of analysis is empirical findings taken from two case studies that show a widespread variability and diversity regarding mobility and migration pattern: Latvia and Albania. Both show different preconditions in their status regarding EU membership along with various types of predominant forms of mobility. Latvia is characterized by stable permanent emigration that tends to increase recently. Albania in contrast experienced a long-term mass out-migration with a dramatic brain drain, but has higher potentials of return. New social practices and multilocal activities of migrants have been on the research agenda of several qualitative and

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D. Göler (✉)

Geographical Research on Migration and Transition, Institute of Geography, Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg, Am Kranen 1, D-96045 Bamberg, Germany  
e-mail: [daniel.goeler@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:daniel.goeler@uni-bamberg.de)

Z. Krišjāne

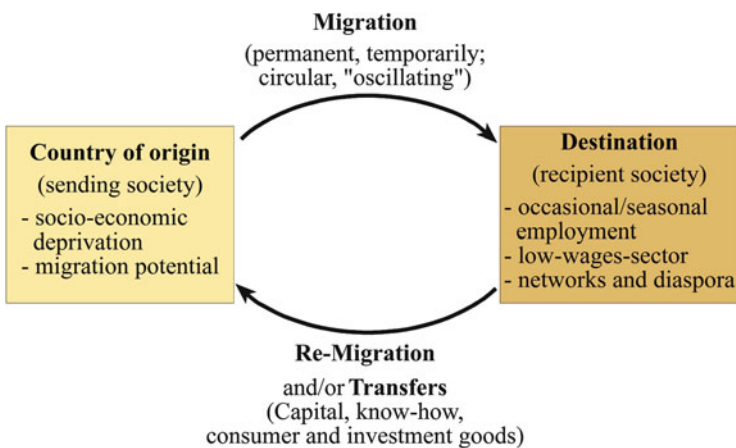
Department of Human Geography, Faculty of Geography and Earth Science, University of Latvia, Raina Blvd. 19, LV-1586 Riga, Latvia  
e-mail: [zaiga.krisjane@lu.lv](mailto:zaiga.krisjane@lu.lv)

quantitative studies (Göler and Doka 2015; Göler et al. 2014; Göler and Krišjāne 2013; Göler 2009a, b; Apsīte et al. 2012; Krišjāne et al. 2013). Analysis focuses on mutual interactions between sending and receiving countries with particular reference to social and spatial consequences and latest variations.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, we refer to transnationalism as a key concept in migration studies. Second, thinking in transnational pattern will be reassessed from a geographical point of view. Third, we introduce concepts and main findings of our empirical field work. Fourth, we suggest “transregionalism” as a modified and more accurate concept for comparative geographical migration studies.

### 2.1.1 *Transnationalism: A Key Concept in Migration Studies*

One of the key tools in contemporary migration research is the well-known concept of transnationalism, understood as “increasing interconnections between nation-states across borders” with “political, economic, social and cultural dimensions” (Faist et al. 2013, viii). It goes back to Glick Schiller et al. (1992) and was further adopted in groundbreaking but also critical studies by – among others – Smith and Guarnizo (1997), Portes et al. (1999), Portes (2001, 2003), Kivisto (2001), Levitt (2001), Vertovec (2001), Levitt et al. (2003), Levitt and Jaworski (2007), Dunn (2010), and Collyer and King (2014). Main outcome of transnationalism from the geographical point of view is the manifold effects of international mobility and migration. Regarding geographical evidence it is very useful to pivot the lens on the “transnational social space” (Pries 2001). Figure 2.1 stresses the combination of traditional and new elements of migration research. Migration is interpreted as a



**Fig. 2.1** The transnational social space (According to Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Pries 2001) (Source: the authors)

physical movement of human beings between territories. The consequences are seen as results of immaterial exchanges and social discourse.

Obviously, the perspective in migration research shifted: “classical” study turned attention to courses and consequences of the change of permanent residence. Contemporary migration studies analyze mainly the variability of social spaces defined by migrants. Consequently, interest began to focus on circular mobility, when a physical migratory movement is repeated episodically or periodically with the result that different “places” are connected. This interconnection can be sustained by further means of internet-based communication (like e-mail, Skype, WhatsApp, and others), which can contribute to the substitution of physical movements. All in all, these strong interrelations between two or even more places, probably located far away from each other, define the transnational social space as an “arena of social interactions” (Dahinden 2009, p. 16).

Perhaps the most noticeable outcome of international migration is the money sent home by migrants, so-called remittances. They are estimated to \$581 billion in 2014 (The World Bank 2014) and tend to increase in spite of the global financial crisis – with regional variations. Remittances are three times the size of official development assistance and they provide an important lifeline for millions of poor and vulnerable households. And they are an important factor not only in the global south but also in (post-socialist) transition countries, especially in those with strong out-migration like Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and others.

The overall economic effects of international migration for the sending and receiving countries and for the migrants themselves are substantial. They include the transfer of money in terms of remittances as well as “social remittances” (Levitt 1999) i.e. knowledge, innovation, behavior, skills and other cultural or lifestyle-related elements. In this view questions related to migration networks and integration become more and more relevant. They include aspects of individual action strategies and of hetero- or multilocality, and a consecutive return migration as a new form of social resilience (Goss and Lindquist 1995; Zelinsky and Lee 1998; Cassarino 2004).

### ***2.1.2 Some Critical Remarks on Transnationalism***

Main point of critics on the concept of transnationalism is the focus on nation-states as basis of analysis. Vice versa, the concept underestimates the manifold migration networks inside the countries of origin as well as possibly developing networks in the destination countries. For this reason it is worth to highlight these topics especially from the geographic point of view. Keeping space in mind, we are suggesting to complement the transnational perspective with a transregional one and will provide a proposal by the end of the paper.

To study these issues, different concepts and appropriate theoretical approaches exist already. One is given by King et al. (2008, p. 44): the study of migration pathways shows the potential variety of the migration process besides a way from place “A” to another place “B,” including (“linking”) internal and international

steps of migratory movements. Another more complex concept focuses on families or households as units for the analysis (Haas 2008, p. 31): household trajectories show the overall complexity of migration. They take family-based groups and individual mobility as well as different scales and occurrences of relocation and reunification into account. Both concepts bear groundbreaking theoretical evidence for empirical studies in transition contexts.

These considerations lead to a new agenda for empirical studies which is able to incorporate distinctiveness and uncertainty as well as the bias between mobility and sedentarism as possibly options. These phenomena exceed characteristics of fluidity, flexibility, plurality, and diversity of migrant groups and mobility. All in all, mobility and migration at least in times of global crisis has created an emerging field for migration studies beyond liquid migration (Engbersen et al. 2010). These configurations may be embraced in the line of “elusive migration systems” as adequate research agenda. This may serve as hypothesis for the following reflections on the basis of empirical field work.

## 2.2 Empirical Evidence: Albania and Latvia

### 2.2.1 *Albania*

Albania, one of the Southeast-European transition countries, faced a period of economic marginalization and destabilization of living conditions after the end of the rigid Stalinist socialist system. The opening of the country 1991 and the deregulation of migration control served as a stimulus for an increasing internal and international migration of a highly vulnerable population. The country explored a period of massive and long-lasting out-migration (Göler 2009a; Vullnetari 2012). Today, the stock of emigrants is 45.4 % of the total population. Remittances, which are estimated at \$1.5 billion, an equivalent to 11.5 % of the national GDP in 2008 (INSTAT 2014, p. 43), still play an important role.

INSTAT (2014, p. 36) indicates that 90 % of emigrants live in Greece and Italy. Both countries are the main source of return migrants after 2008. Even if the migratory balance is still negative, there is a remarkable return migration flow to Albania. In some cases, when migrants have finished their individual migration cycle, this is a voluntary movement. In others it is a forced one. Returning from Greece, for example, is mostly triggered by the economic crisis there (Göler and Doka 2014). Especially less-qualified migrant workers get problems on the labor market, according to the motto “last hired, first fired.” However, migration in both ways is part of the coping strategy; living in the diaspora is a basic element of resilience. And, additionally, keeping close relations to various regions in the home country (and sometimes to several places in the country of destination) is a new transregional element. Besides monetary effects such as remittances, nonmonetary

effects of out-migration like social remittances and intensive knowledge and innovation transfers can be observed.

This is true for returnee's business "in good times." The results of a study from 2006 (cf. Göler 2007) may serve as a typical example of the nexus between migration and entrepreneurship. In this regard, remittances are a promoting factor for the formation of private entrepreneurship in Southeast Europe. Qualitative studies based on entrepreneurs' biographies showed that the capital transfer from abroad plays a crucial part in the foundation of small- and medium-sized enterprises. The connection of entrepreneurship and migration is a rule in Albania. Only 1 out of 34 interviewees in our survey was not in emigration before his start-up. In fact, start-ups usually are prepared with a stay of several months or a couple of years abroad, mostly in Italy or Greece. Some of our interviewees looked back at several back-and-forth movements to different countries. Others spend a continuous 10-year period abroad.

In comparison to our second study on returnees, conducted in late 2012 in southern Albania, the general framework and conditions for return migrants had changed. While Albania was hardly affected by the global financial and economic crisis directly, high unemployment in Greece caused problems for many migrants. For years return was just an option for Albanian migrants. Recently returning became a necessity for lots of them. Biographical sketches from returnees in southern Albania indicate two facts: first, return migrants meet, in comparison to the time when they left the country, more or less the same problems in Albania itself. Second, potential windows of opportunities are, in comparison to the past decade, dying out, at least due to increasing competition in doing business and on the labor market. Additionally, there is a big problem of social exclusion of returning migrants, mainly among youngsters who grew up abroad and came back together with parents according to the family's decision (tied migrations). They try to finish secondary school, to get a third-level education or just make plans to leave the country again. The common issue among them is the combination of internal and international migration, because most of them choose new places of residence after return, outside the village their family came from.

### **2.2.2 *Latvia***

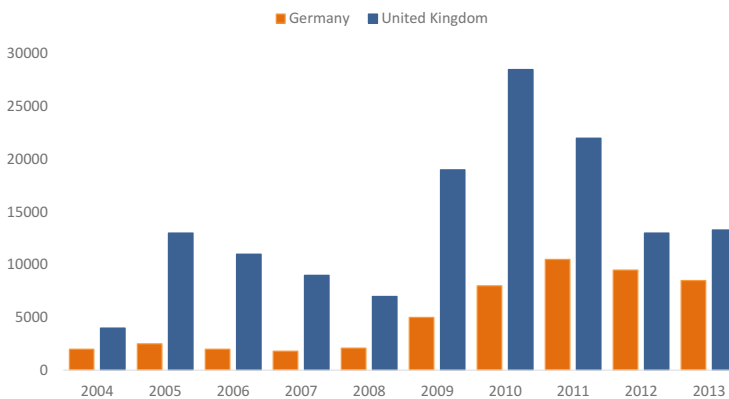
Out-migration from Latvia has not been consistently high. It has noticeably increased since 2008 as a result of the financial crisis. It induced also shifts in migration system taking place in the context of Latvia.

In 2004 Latvia became one of the EU member states. After accession the country has experienced important social, political, and economic changes. Latvia was also one of the countries that suffered negative economic recession effects. While being one of the EU member states, Latvia due to emigration has lost around 10 % of the population and GDP decreases for 17 % in 2009 (CSBL 2014). After the EU enlargement, the main destination countries were the UK and Ireland. The most

drastic flows of emigration from Latvia were found after year 2008 where due to the high unemployment rate which was a consequence to previous economic boom years and high number of people being unable to cover monthly payments and mortgage payments, they choose to live and work abroad (Apsīte et al. 2012). The economic downturn period highlighted the new destinations such as Germany and Norway. After the end of the transition period, Germany as a new destination was widely recognized from migrants from Latvia and wage differences has been an important attracting factor. Despite the fact that English-speaking countries show rather high number of immigrants from Latvia, Germany experiences stable increase in registered in-migrants from Latvia especially along with economic instability in the country of origin and deregulation to A8 countries. According to the Eurostat data in 2013, around 150,000 Latvian citizens resided outside Latvia and 76 % of those live in one of the top three countries (the UK, Germany, and Ireland; Eurostat 2014) (Fig. 2.2).

Previous research on migration patterns from Latvia showed that shortly after accession to the EU, labor migrants from Latvia were mostly driven by economic motives and necessity to earn more or to gain higher income compared to Latvia (Krišjāne et al. 2007).

The key tool in order to characterize Latvians residing abroad was to perform survey through social media. Online survey took place in the beginning of year 2012 and comprised migrants from Latvia residing in the main destination countries. The unique data set results allowed describing profiles of migrants from Latvia and to discover main emigration motives. The survey was administered through social media [www.draugiem.lv](http://www.draugiem.lv) ([www.frype.com](http://www.frype.com)) and the questionnaires were individually posted to the registered users residing in one of the top countries of destination. Sample size in each country was calculated separately, for instance, the UK ( $n = 1,117$ ; 41 % male; 58 % female), Ireland ( $n = 618$ ; 36 % male; 64 % female), and Germany ( $n = 426$ ; 36 % male; 64 % female). Respondents were in the age between 16 and 73 years, but the largest group comprised persons aged under

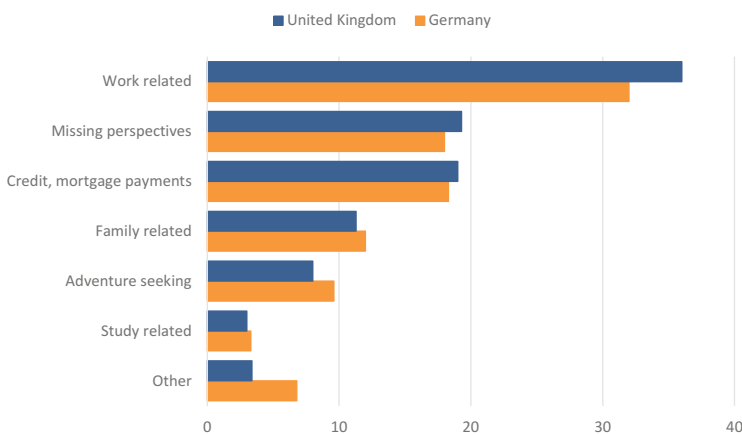


**Fig. 2.2** Migrant flows from Latvia to top destination countries: the UK and Germany (Source: Statistisches Bundesamt 2014; Department for Work and Pensions 2014)

30 years of age. In the case of the UK, it was possible to compare with the official A8 migrants statistics where the sample correlated with the general age composition of A8/Latvian migrants in the UK (Gillingham 2010; Apsīte-Beriņa 2013; McCollum and Apsīte-Beriņa 2015).

The main motives for emigration in recent years corresponding to the difficulties of the economic crisis were mostly economic related. Both in the case of the UK and Germany unemployment have an important role in the out-migration decision-making. Necessity to find employment and gain desired salary has been recognized as an important aspect in order to move to Germany. This is mostly due to the economic instability and dismissal related to the general reaction of worsening of economic conditions in the country of origin. Previously well-off people who took bank loans for various expenditures along with the change of economic fortune in Latvia occurred in the position of out-migration in order to keep the properties and cover monthly payments which were formed in the period before the economic downturn (Apsīte-Beriņa 2013). Germany as an attractive destination slightly more than before attracts persons with private and family reasons and welcomes persons who desire to travel and receive international experience while living in Germany. Most out-migration arguments from Latvia to the main destination countries are economically grounded. Study-related motives or others constitute only around 5 % (Fig. 2.3).

Just after accession, geographical distribution of out-migration regions in Latvia was rather equal – all regions lost some proportion of residents; however new trends of migration patterns were noticed. Despite the fact that the capital Riga showed the lowest unemployment rate and available employment to some extent, a number of Riga residents were not satisfied with available remuneration and therefore emigrated. Furthermore employment opportunities in other cities and rural parts of the countries were insufficient and more precisely employment range and income level



**Fig. 2.3** Motivation of Latvian emigrants by top destination countries: the UK and Germany (Source: Online Survey 2012)

were much lower than in the capital. Therefore, traditionally residents of small towns and rural parts of Latvia went working in larger regional cities or capital. Along with accessibility of work opportunities abroad, residents of peripheral regions could directly make international moves. This is largely due to the distribution and accessibility of low-cost airlines in this region connecting to the main destination countries. On the other hand, period of economic crisis along with migrants from peripheral regions of Latvia attracted also residents of Riga and Pierīga region (the suburbs of the capital Riga). Persons who emigrated from central parts of the country along with other secondary motives as the prime push factor mentioned need to cover high mortgage payments; however, migrants from lagging behind region in the eastern part of the country mentioned necessity to earn more in order to cover monthly consumption costs.

Mortgage payments as increasing motivation sustain the transregional argument, as people who took loans to improve their housing situation (under which they suffer today) were usually living in Riga's suburban area and were originally moved from socialist period housing estate neighborhoods of the capital city.

### **2.3 A Proposal: Transregionalism as a New Conceptual Framework**

The case studies show the ability of migration systems and subsystems to cope with internal and external caused shocks, to reorganize in this process in a novel and creative manner, and, if necessary, to redefine themselves as a new social system. Main characteristics of these systems are widespread multilocal social networks led by migration, individual migration experiences, and migration culture. Migrants are in this sense interpreted as agents of societal change. They are able to adapt social practices from different economic, social, and cultural contexts. Such kind of permanent resilience as a performed social practice is based on creativity, knowledge, and other individual and personal skills and capacities of the participants of the network and may correspond with our considerations on elusive migration systems.

Return migration and, to some extent, also the flow of remittances are strengthening already existing regional disparities in the countries of origin. Both are usually directed to the main economic centers or, as reported already decades ago by Portes (1978), to large towns in the home country and less to the region of origin; this is true especially for the case of (possible) return. Even those migrants that stay abroad are showing elements of transregionalism, at least while shifting from one country to another. And paying mortgages transfers money mainly into centers, not in peripheries.

So our first result is the increasing complexity of migration pattern with strong interconnections between different kinds of mobility with overlapping elements of permanent, temporary, and circular migratory movements (Fig. 2.4). These specific



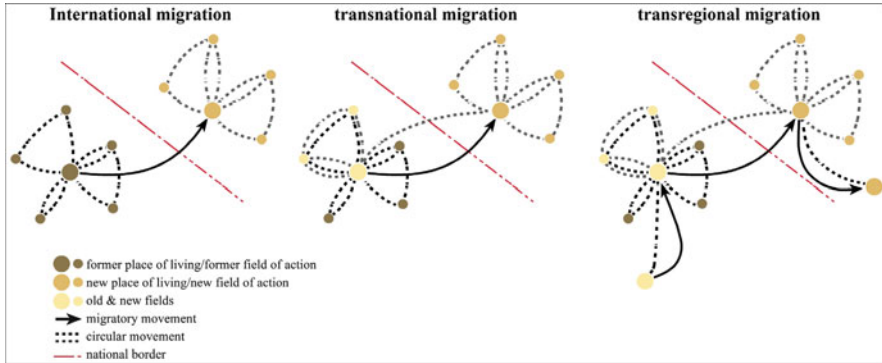


Fig. 2.4 From international to transnational to transregional migration (Source: draft based on Gans 2011, p. 118, modified)

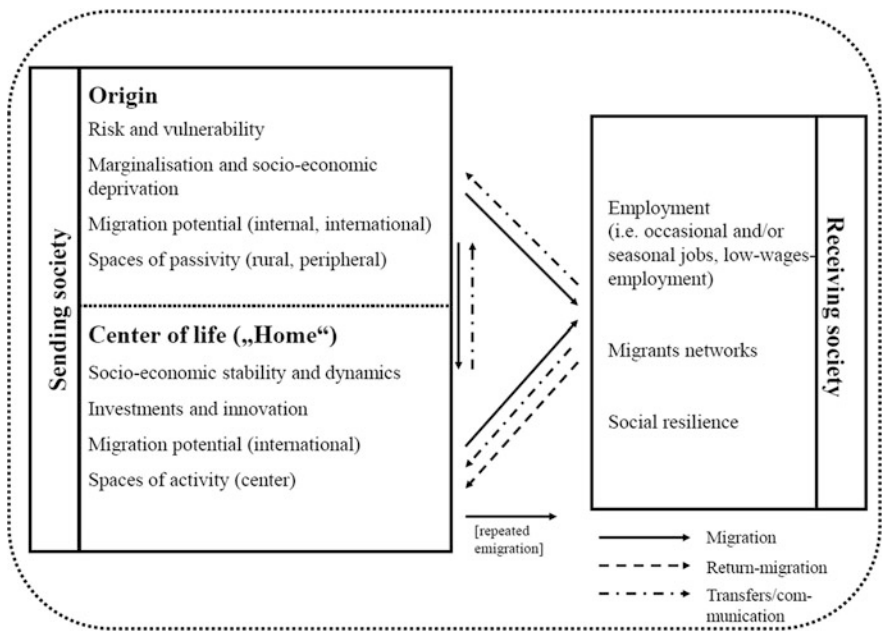


Fig. 2.5 Elements of transregionalism (Source: the authors)

changes regarding spatial interconnections characterize the step from (classical) international to (modern) transnational to (postmodern) transregional forms of mobility.

Thinking in distinguished geographical scales leads to a model of the “transregional social space” (Fig. 2.5). This proposal combines manifold interconnections of internal and international migration, underlined by a rather complex

network with circular movements and various repercussions between sending and receiving spaces, places, and societies.

Transregional migrants use movements and communications on local, regional, and national scales as tools to overcome stages of risk, vulnerability, and uncertainty. Seeking the place of living in more favorable conditions in and outside the home country is an element of social resilience. In this model, return is an option among others, besides sedentarism or multilocality, respectively. The perspective is an increase of socioeconomic spatial differentiations, not only between nation-states but also on a subnational level.

## 2.4 Conclusions

Our considerations on elusive migration systems and the proposal of the model may serve as an additive tool for a more detailed interpretation of geographically differentiated outcomes of transnationalism. We aim to contribute to a new framework for geographical migration studies, taking into account the liquid and elusive character of individual migratory movements and mobility.

Permanent changes of general contexts on the global level and the accelerating variability of local socioeconomic circumstances make it necessary to overcome thinking in national dimensions and territories.

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