Article

Transnational Social Capital in Migration: The Example of Student Migration from Bulgaria to Germany

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Abstract

Focusing on student migration from Bulgaria to Germany, this article examines what types of social capital are accumulated, transformed and implemented through migration, who profits from the investment, and how. The empirical work consists of 60 narrative biographical interviews with migrants and returnees to Bulgaria. The research reveals that the accumulation and investment of social capital takes place throughout the migratory trajectory—starting well before leaving—and is embedded in a transnational social space. Transnational networks exist as family, peer and professional networks, and all of them have a specific meaning for the migrants. Family networks are naturally present; they provide bonding social capital and thus have a stabilizing function for the individual's identity. Professional networks have a strongly bridging function, helping the young migrants to manage status transitions. After return the transnational social capital acquired during the migratory stay helps returnees to re-integrate and find their way into the Bulgarian labour market. It also encourages them to pursue activities which are meaningful for civil society development, or for innovative (social) entrepreneurship. Thus, transnational social capital helps migrants to align their biographical development to the future, considering the post-transformative environment of Bulgaria, thereby helping to manage transformative changes and supporting societal modernization processes.

Keywords

Bulgaria; Germany; social capital; student migration; return migration; transnational approach

1. Introduction

Taking a comparative perspective on student migration from Bulgaria to Germany, this article addresses the questions of why, and under what circumstances, international students return home after having graduated abroad, given the fact that they have studied in a highly developed country and return to a transition country with lower wage standards and fewer economic opportunities. Through the lens of neoclassical economic approaches (e.g., Harris & Todaro, 1970; Sjaastad, 1962), which see wage gaps as a major trigger for migration, return migration from Germany to Bulgaria would appear as a movement against economic rationality. After

the end of the Cold War, Bulgaria underwent massive economic and political changes, which led to escalating unemployment numbers, poverty, and large-scale emigration. The integration of Bulgaria into the European Union in 2007 increased emigration to other EU countries. Between 2007 and 2017, the Bulgarian Statistical Office documented 192,132 departures of Bulgarians, but only 66,541 returning Bulgarian citizens, amounting to a migratory loss of 125,591 people (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, 2018).

Due to the selectivity of emigration flows in terms of age and skill levels, emigration leads to accelerated demographic ageing and to a lack of skilled labour force and thus has negative consequences for economic pros-

perity and competitiveness. In this respect, the Bulgarian situation is comparable to other post-socialist transition countries (e.g., Lang, Glorius, Nadler, & Kovács, 2016, p. 5). Regarding the age and skill selectivity of migration, emigration for educational purposes is of specific importance for Bulgaria, as studying abroad frequently constitutes a pathway into the host country's labour market and thus into long-term or permanent emigration (Dreher & Poutvaara, 2011; Pratsinakis, Hatziprokopiou, Grammatikas, & Labrianidis, 2017). Students returning from abroad, on the other hand, are seen as an important element for the economic and social development of a country, as they can re-invest their skills and knowledge which they acquired while studying abroad (Ghimire & Maharjan, 2015; le Bail & Shen, 2008).

While taking the return-development nexus of migration as the overarching research perspective, this article examines the mechanisms of how social capital is acquired, transformed and implemented throughout the migration trajectory. It specifically focuses on the role of strong and weak ties, a specification of social capital introduced by Granovetter (1973) and further elaborated by Putnam (2000). The main argument of the article is that the accumulation and investment of social capital takes place throughout the whole migratory trajectory, starting well before leaving, and is strongly embedded in a transnational social space which structures migration decisions, trajectories and the evaluation of migratory steps. The various types of social capital characterized by strong and weak ties not only support the practical steps of migration and integration, but also serve as an emotional anchor for migrants facing biographical uncertainty.

The findings are based on a three-year research project, which entailed the collection of 60 narrative biographical interviews with educational migrants and returnees to Bulgaria, expert interviews and document analysis. The empirical part of this article follows the migrants' trajectories—from Bulgaria to Germany, during the migratory stay, during the return process and after return. By examining the impact of social capital throughout the migration trajectory, the article connects to the scope of this thematic issue to theorise the role of migration with respect to social capital accumulation and transfer.

The article is organized in five sections. Following the introduction, I will discuss the main conceptual approaches used for this research and give an overview of related research. Section 3 will explain the methodology of the research, and Section 4 will present selected results focusing on the topic of social capital. In the concluding section, I will wrap up the results and discuss them in the light of social capital theory.

2. The Role of Social Capital in Migration and Return

2.1. Social Capital and Means of Transfer

Following the typology by Bourdieu (1986), capital can be differentiated into economic, cultural and social capital.

All three forms of capital are relevant for migratory processes. Economic needs can initiate migration and economic capital become accumulated during the migratory stay and reinvested after return. Cultural capital, in terms of knowledge and skills, helps to prepare a migratory stay, for example if specific language skills are necessary to gain access to a host country's labour market. Focusing on student migration, cultural capital is enhanced and accumulated during the migratory stay and can be used as a resource when entering the labour market back home or abroad. Social capital can be characterized as mutual support based on shared belonging to a specific social group, created by family ties, geographical ties, friendship or shared biographies. It is provided in the form of information, assistance or material support with the expectation that the investment will pay off in the future (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21).

The accumulation and transfer of social capital depends not only on who is involved in the transfer process but also on the fabric of social ties. Granovetter (1973, p. 1361) defines the strength of social ties in interpersonal relationships in terms of "the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services." While strong ties are often attached to the same milieu, weak ties develop between different milieus. Therefore, weak ties can have a bridging function between social milieus and are thus relevant for the diffusion of information and innovation (Granovetter, 1973, pp. 1363–1364). In a slightly different taxonomy, Putnam (2000) defines the "bridging" and "bonding" functions of social capital. While he makes the same distinction as Granovetter regarding the characteristics of bridging social capital as "outward looking and encompass[ing] people across diverse social cleavages" and bonding social capital as "inward looking" and "reinforc[ing] exclusive identities" (Putnam, 2000, p. 22), he highlights the stabilizing function of bonding social capital, defining it for example as friends who can be relied upon even in situations of crisis.

In the research on return migration, the question how the various forms of migrant capital (economic, cultural, social) can be transferred and re-invested in the home country is of paramount importance. The seminal work of Cerase (1974) on returning labour emigrants in Italy suggests that not all returnees are able or willing to contribute to the home country's development. While some used their capital mainly for individual consumerism (return of success, return of retirement) and others returned because their migratory project had failed, some returnees were willing and able to significantly contribute to the home country's development (return of innovation; Cerase, 1974). Studies on capital transfer in the context of migration stress the stimulating effects of return migration in terms of economic development and the introduction of innovative knowledge, and they highlight the impact of social capital in this process. Both Wolfeil (2013) and Klein-Hitpaß (2016) in their studies on return migration to Poland saw

the high impact of intercultural knowledge and intercultural social contacts on successful placement in the labour market. Also, Klein-Hitpaß (2016) found mutual trust to be crucial for the successful entrepreneurial activities of returnees. Those elements were embedded in the transnational social field which served as a major field of reference for the migrants and which was developed and maintained throughout the migratory trajectory.

2.2. Transnationalism and Social Capital

The application of Bourdieu's social capital theory to migration studies entails a number of conceptual and methodological challenges. Even though Bourdieu's notion of "social field" can be interpreted in social rather than in geographical terms (Nowicka, 2015, p. 18), the social capital approach at least implicitly relates to only one single national context. The introduction of transnational theory since the 1990s (e.g., Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992) and the adoption of transnational social spaces as major reference frames for migrants (e.g., Faist, 2000; Pries, 1999) challenged the implementation of the social capital approach. Scholars had to find ways to adapt the approach to a social field that spans more than one national category, and thus blurs power relations which are conceptualized within one national framework. Several pieces of research tackled those challenges and thus were able to show the potential of the social capital approach in transnational migration studies. Kelly and Lusis (2006) applied Bourdieu's notion of the habitus as a heuristic framework for integrating the various dimensions of transmigrants' lives. They showed that, for example, the low-status work of Filipino migrants in Toronto was "converted into substantial cultural and social capital back in the Philippines" (Kelly & Lusis, 2006, p. 844), and also the habitus of being a transnational migrant helped raise the social status back home. Regarding the definition of space in Bourdieu's concept, they suggested paying less attention to absolute, physical spaces than to social spaces (Kelly & Lusis, 2006, p. 845).

A further strand of research which applies the social capital terminology to the field of transnational migration studies is research on social remittances. While remittances are generally defined as financial means that are transferred home in the context of migration, the term "social remittances" mirrors Bourdieu's capital terminology, stating that contributions from migration can also be observed in the cultural and social sphere. Following Levitt (1998, p. 927), social remittances are "the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending country communities." The social remittances approach assumes that migrants reflect new structures they are confronted with during migration on the basis of their own, imported reference scheme. As a result of this reflection, they either maintain or change their routines, or develop some kind of creolized routine (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

The phenomenon has already been widely described in migration research even before the introduction of the term "social remittances," for example describing the development of "cultures of migration" or "migration-driven forms of cultural change" (de Haas, 2010; Grabowska, Garapich, Jazwinska, & Radziwinowicz, 2017). Grabowska et al. (2017, pp. 15–16) stress the long history of social remittances in the context of Polish migration, for example changes in dressing habits, gender relations, career aspirations and changes of personal attitudes, norms and values. Research applying the concept of social remittances has highlighted the potentials of this form of capital transfer for home communities. As remigrants introduce non-formal innovative knowledge and practices in their society of origin, they can become "agents of change" and fuel the cohesion of social norms and values (Grabowska et al., 2017, p. 3).

In a comparative perspective, both Bourdieu's (1986) social capital approach and Levitt's (1998) social remittances approach show a number of similarities, but also differences. Both concepts apply an expanded definition of "capital" which also integrates non-monetary terms of exchange. Both provide a differentiated typology considering strong and weak ties, bonding and bridging social capital, or deep and shallow social remittances. However, there are major differences in the explanatory focus and in the geographical perspective of the two approaches. While the social capital theory aims to explain mechanisms for establishing and maintaining power hierarchies, the social remittances approach focuses on the diffusion of ideas and innovation. In Bourdieu's reading, the geographical focus does not seem fixed but implicitly relates to only one single national context, while social remittances look beyond the borders of a nation state. However, the term "remittances" ("paying back") implicitly suggests a unidirectional diffusion process from destination to home country (society), even though research literature also describes the reverse transfer of cultural norms or practices (e.g., Grabowska & Garapich, 2016; Grabowska et al., 2017).

For both concepts, the explanatory potential can be enhanced when designing them for a transnational research frame. This implies a definition of social capital which is detached from national boundaries, but which is sensitive towards the reproduction of power hierarchies in home and destination country and how migrants reflect and transform them. Transnational social capital thus can be understood as social capital which is accumulated and utilized within a transnational social space, which connects migrants with residents in home and destination country. It consists of strong and weak social ties and manifold processes of mutual support. Transnational migrants use transnational social capital at a varying degree throughout the migratory trajectory, so that bridging and bonding functions of social capital carriers might change or overlap. Notwithstanding that both the social capital approach and the social remittances approach are fruitful for the empirical case developed in this article,

the analysis will mainly focus on the accumulation, implementation and transformation of social capital during the migratory trajectory. A deeper exploration of social innovation and its diffusion in the context of return migration to Bulgaria will be carried out in other publications on this project.

3. Data Collection and Research Methodology

The data used for this article stems from a research project on Bulgarian migrants who studied abroad—focusing on Germany as a destination country—and then either remained in the host country or returned to Bulgaria. In total, 60 narrative, biographical interviews with migrants were carried out in 2016 and 2017, of whom 30 had returned to Bulgaria (coded as BUL1-BUL30) at the time of the interview, and 30 had remained in Germany (coded as DEU1-DEU30). Furthermore, the data contains eight expert interviews (coded as E1-E8) with stakeholders in the field of student migration, return, and Bulgarian–German relations. The migrant interviews were carried out based on guidelines which focused on: 1) the motives for studying abroad, 2) daily life abroad, 3) the return or stay decision after graduation, 4) life after the return/stay decision was implemented, and 5) a provisional appraisal of the migration biography. The guidelines gave enough room for the individual narration of experiences, emotions and reflections, but also ensured that the qualitative data could be analysed within a comparative framework.

Data collection followed a snowball strategy. In Bulgaria, personal network contacts of the interviewer, migrant associations and transnational institutions were starting points for snowball sampling; interviews were carried out—following the snowball—in the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv and Weliko Tarnovo. In Germany, initial contacts to Bulgarian graduates were developed via student and alumni associations. Interviews were conducted—again following the snowball—in the cities of Berlin, Leipzig, Chemnitz, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Darmstadt, Munich and Stuttgart. The snowball sampling aimed to achieve an even gender split and a good variety regarding age groups, time of migration, family situation and studied subjects (see Table 1). However, the sample cannot be regarded as representative in a quantitative sense. Interviews were mostly carried out in Bulgarian (with some in English and German) and later transcribed and translated into German.

The analysis of the narrative interviews follows the analytical methodology of Schütze (1983) and is methodologically based on the concept of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), according to which people are regarded as goal-oriented agents whose actions are influenced by their integration into a given social context. A reconstructive analysis of biographical actions aims to understand the self-interpretations of respondents in terms of biographical stages, action orientations and decisions. Therefore, the reason for an action is less decisive for the analysis than the actual practices and the goals of an action. With regard to the transnational research field, it is assumed that in the course of a transnational biography, orientations emerge and are transformed through new experiences and the reflection of those experiences. Sociology of knowledge assumes that those orientations are partly unwittingly present. Therefore, they are denoted as "a-theoretical knowledge," because we use them in our daily practices and routines without explicating them (Nohl, 2006, p. 10).

The interview transcripts were analysed in two directions: along the individual cases, and along the topics detected across the whole dataset. First, the transcripts were sequenced and paraphrased, in order to reveal the main storylines and meta-topics of each interview. On the basis of the sequencing, an extended case description was prepared, which delineated and interpreted the biographical passages, individual goals and stages of de-

Table 1. Characterization of the interviewed migrants.

	Migrants in Germany (DEU)	Returnees in Bulgaria (BUL)
Number of interviews	30	30
Gender	11 male, 19 female	13 male, 17 female
Age Groups	21–29 years: 14 30–39 years: 15 40–49 years: 1	21–29 years: 14 30–39 years: 12 40–49 years: 4
Emigration to Germany	before 2007: 14 2007 until 2013: 14 since 2014: 2	before 2007: 17 2007 until 2013: 13 since 2014: 0
Occupation	Entrepreneur: 5 Public Services: 4 Employee: 5 Not working: 6	Entrepreneur: 4 Public Services: 5 Employee in German Company: 6 Employee in Transnational Company: 13 Unemployed: 2

velopment from the perspective of the interviewees. The second stage of analysis entailed a systematic coding of all transcripts to prepare for the thematic analyses across the whole dataset. For this article, I use the thematic cross-analysis to highlight specific topics of the analysis—other papers from this project elaborate the biographical viewpoint and put biographical case studies to the fore.

4. Results

In the presentation of results, I will follow the migratory trajectories of the interviewees in order to reveal what kind of social capital is used, how, and for what purpose. First, I will show how social capital is implemented to facilitate the migratory process (Section 4.1). Then I will highlight the differences in form and function between social capital which is bound to the home country, and social capital which is acquired abroad (Section 4.2). The last subsection accompanies the process of return migration and analyses what forms of social capital are used during the return process (Section 4.3).

4.1. Social Capital as Facilitator of Student Migration

The first finding refers to the question of what kind of social capital facilitates the educational migration and when, how and where it is compiled. Many interviewees graduated from language high schools in Bulgaria: schools that are specialized in teaching one foreign language intensively. Those schools represent a transnational environment which structures and fuels the emigration decision in manifold ways: There is a specific language curriculum, leading to an internationally acknowledged language certificate. Most of the teaching is done in the foreign language, and there is original teaching material from the respective country. The language high schools organize field trips to the relevant country, as well as language competitions and individual consultations regarding the further educational career abroad. The students of the language high schools form a specific social group with a shared habitus. Regarding the emigration decision after high-school graduation, peers and siblings serve as role models for migration, and thus share experiences and provide support: "As I said, I was in this German language high school in Sofia, and all of my friends, or nearly all, 98%, are German-speaking people, who also studied in Germany" (DEU 12, lines 168–170).

Social capital directly facilitated and sometimes even triggered and directed the migratory process of those high school graduates. Several interviewees stress the collective emigration decision of the peer group, based on a collective action orientation. For example, interviewee BUL9 recalls her decision to move to the German city of Muenster in 1996 as follows:

BUL9: Together with my schoolmates, who were one year older, I decided rather early to study in Germany. And that's what happened.…About fifteen of us went.

I: Why did you choose Muenster?

BUL9: There were two reasons. First, the university has a good reputation, and second I knew people there. They could give me information on the spot. In 1996, the situation was different. It was not that easy to study abroad. (BUL9, lines 8–22)

Others explicitly stated that their emigration was predetermined by their parents, who supported the educational migration from the beginning of the educational career. For example, DEU10, who graduated from a German high school in Sofia, recalls:

I was in a German language class, where you do the German high school exam, with the clear goal to study in Germany. This was partly the wish of my parents. They have had a fascination for Germany since the 1980s, I don't know why. They love Germany—rationally, irrationally, a nice mixture of both. So for me, this was a choice which I never doubted, it was just like this after eighth or ninth grade: Okay, now you are in German high school, and later you will study in Germany, and then you will probably stay there and get a job. (DEU10, lines 2–11)

We can also see how different forms and functions of social capital are invested during the migratory project, with weak ties and bridging social capital becoming especially relevant for a successful transition from high school in Bulgaria to higher education in Germany. Many interviewees relied on contact persons regarding the choice of a German university and the organisation of the stay. Those contact persons were mostly "friends of friends," so there was no close relationship before, and interviewees approached them intentionally to receive advice and assistance. This is reflected by DEU8, who moved to the city of Chemnitz in 2011 and initially relied on the assistance of a contact person within her transnational social network:

It was three months before high school graduation, I think. I talked to a friend of my mum who has lived here in Chemnitz for fifteen years, I think. She asked me what my plans are for the future, and I told her that I want to study. And then she suggested that I come here. (DEU8, lines 9–12)

During the first months, DEU8 lived with the friend of her mother and was helped with all initial steps which were necessary to start studying at the University of Chemnitz. Later, she moved into a student dormitory. Thus, the contact person served as a weak tie, in Granovetter's (1973) terminology, and provided bridging social capital, following Putnam (2000).

Bonding social capital, on the other hand, is produced, implemented and consumed during the migratory stay within the network of peers at the migratory

destination. Especially Bulgarian peers play an important role. Almost all interviewees immediately searched for Bulgarian peers when they arrived at their destination in Germany, or the contact was already established prior to arrival. The Bulgarian "buddy" not only alleviated the first steps into the new environment, but also served as an emotional anchor. Hanging out together, having someone to communicate with in Bulgarian and cooking Bulgarian dishes helped our interviewees to overcome homesickness and depression, which frequently overwhelmed them during the first year abroad:

> I recall the beginning as a dark period. Later we talked about it. In the very moment when it happens, you don't think about it. You don't think "Oh, it is so hard, I want to be back home." But if I look back now, I have to say that the whole first year was very depressing for me. (DEU11, lines 81–84)

> There is such a bitter memory of the first months, where you think, you are a stranger, you speak the language, but not very well, so people are making fun of you. And you sleep somewhere in a hostel and things like that. (DEU14, lines 352–354)

Interviewee BUL12, who studied communication sciences at the University of Hohenheim/Stuttgart, recalls her desperation at the beginning, after having arrived "alone with a big suitcase" at Stuttgart central station:

> In Germany, the pressure to perform was huge. I was alone among one hundred German students! The difference between German and Bulgarian students is tremendous, notably those German students who study communication sciences. They are very ambitious, very motivated. They go to any lengths to reach their goal. (BUL12, lines 101–103)

As she felt inferior to her fellow students, she could not make friends with anybody from her class. She felt very lonely during the whole first semester. Then she made friends with a Spanish ERASMUS student in her dormitory, who comforted her, as she recalls:

> We shared the flat for one year. She helped me so much. She was such a cheerful person; she helped me to overcome the first shock. We went out together, we laughed a lot, and she kept telling me that everything would work out. (BUL12, lines 114–119)

After the first semester, she met a Bulgarian student in her university town, Stuttgart, and they became friends:

> Over time we became close friends. He supported me a lot. We travelled together, we went out together. I didn't have the feeling of loneliness anymore. During the first term I was so stressed. I always started crying during the Skype calls with my parents, because

I wanted to get back home. (BUL12, lines 122–125)

According to our interviewees, the Bulgarian "buddy system" is not just a purely utilitarian activity, but also stems from the implicit desire for community with biographical peers. Quite often, there is one key individual per study location who serves as the main hub of the network and is pushing activities such as the joint celebration of Bulgarian holidays or "Balkan parties." Those activities help to deepen the attachment to the in-group, and also provide opportunities to make the Bulgarian culture more visible in Germany. Thus, these activities can also be described as a cultural capital transfer from Bulgaria to Germany:

> I frequently organized parties, not for profit, but just so the Bulgarians can get in contact with each other.…To bring this atmosphere from Bulgaria over here. Because, in Germany, I never liked the clubs. The bars are not that nice or appealing to us. And also the atmosphere is just not there, the people are just a little bit more introverted. (DEU6, lines 86–103)

Over time, those informal social networks of friends can transform into institutionalized structures, such as Bulgarian study associations with formalized status positions and membership fees. For example, DEU15, located in Berlin, recalls his activities for Bulgarian students, starting from a loose network until the formation of a student association, as follows:

> During the third semester, some friends and I saw the necessity—I wouldn't call it a gap, but the need for a student association here in Berlin. We learned that there used to be one, but it became inactive in 2013. We contacted the former founders and they helped us with the registration, they gave us a little know-how, and told us how we could develop our work.…We also tried to facilitate the integration process for the newcomers: We told them, okay, these were the faults that we used to make, please don't make these mistakes! So this was the know-how transfer from the older Bulgarian students, the more experienced students, to the new ones. I think we organized thirty events this year. (DEU15, lines 49–58, 120–128)

Regarding the provisional status of student life and the fluidity of their personal presence in a specific geographical location, institutionalization processes as described in this example can support the stability of a social network consisting of weak ties in the light of individual and generational changes. The formalisation of the network helps to uphold symbolic or practical ties between its members, an aspect which is not relevant for kinship-based networks such as family networks.

4.2. The Significance of Transnational Social Capital Accumulation for Future Decisions

In this section, I will take a closer look at different forms and functions of transnational social capital, and how it enables the student migrants to manoeuvre in a transnational social field, especially regarding future (migratory) decisions. Many of the young Bulgarians who move to Germany have no concrete plans about whether they will return after graduation or stay in the destination country. Some make their decision dependent on the question of whether they succeed in establishing themselves in the German labour market, or not. Against this background, the return for many appears as a "lifeline," an option that can always be chosen. A well-known Bulgarian proverb— "at home, it's also the walls, that help"—serves as an allegory for a society where traditional kinship-based social networks play an important role. The young migrants are aware of the reliability of these strong ties, and those who have returned also report the immediate relief those networks bring to their personal lives, as BUL1 explains below:

> If you want to have more freedom, more flexibility, more free time, I think, you can have this easier here in Bulgaria [laughs]. In Germany, it would have been very, very hard. I always imagined life in Germany where I have a job, really the same job for years, so that I am somehow more fixed. And here, I see it is all more flexible, I don't know how....We have a proverb in Bulgaria, which is "at home, it's also the walls, that help."...I think you can also translate this in very practical terms. When I am in Germany, I have to take care of everything myself, all the time—also here, but here you have your family, you have support. Sometimes also the financial support, well, not directly the financial, but you also have your parents' apartment, you can afford to, to have more…to really allow yourself more free time. (BUL1, lines 57–77)

This citation suggests that strong ties and bonding social capital are reliable in numerous practical terms and thus increase the resilience and emotional stability of individuals.

However, studying abroad and the biographical uncertainty arising from the transition from studies to the labour market have also made many respondents aware of the need to actively accumulate social capital. In particular, contacts with the professional world must be acquired. Given that most of our interviewees had not decided where to start a professional career after graduation in Germany, it was necessary for them to establish links with relevant labour market actors in Germany and Bulgaria. Many of our interviewees thus completed internships in companies in Bulgaria or spent an ERASMUS exchange semester in Bulgaria as part of their studies abroad. Through this, they could develop first contacts with Bulgarian labour market actors, which were impor-

tant if they wanted to return after graduation. At the same time, the development of professional contacts in both countries was perceived as crucial for an international career, and also as an additional asset for a successful return:

> And, the most important thing during studies is that you make as many contacts as possible, in various sectors, such as with economists, managers, or business owners, so that you can later cooperate. This means that you do not completely abandon Germany. (DEU6, lines 547–560)

Another aspect of social capital is intercultural competence, which can be gained during a migratory stay, as DEU15 argues. Therefore, he recommends that young people do at least one semester abroad in order to:

> Get to know new cultures, because this is really very, very important and it will also definitely be a crucial competence in Bulgaria, to deal with people from different cultural backgrounds. I think this already is an essential prerequisite for economic life. (DEU15, lines 338–351)

And in fact, quite a large proportion of returnees are employed in international companies in Bulgaria. Also among the "remainers," some developed transnational business opportunities between Germany and Bulgaria, actively using their transnational social capital as a bridge.

Summing up this section, it becomes clear that transnational social capital is highly relevant for the preparation of the next step in the migratory trajectory and the next stage of life course. The transnational character of social capital is partly a by-product of the migration experience, but partly it is intentionally acquired. Both the bridging and the bonding social capital are relevant at this stage, albeit for different purposes. As Putnam (2000) formulated it, bonding social capital is good for "getting by" and bridging is crucial for "getting ahead."

4.3. Paying Back: Transnational Social Capital Transfer

My next step is to examine activities involved in transnational social capital transfer in the context of return. I will also look at how social capital might be transformed over time. The first observation is that, like in the beginning of the migratory trajectory, social capital is implemented to facilitate return migration and reintegration back home. This means that our interviewees rely on transnational social capital for getting the information necessary to prepare for a smooth return. While during emigration, educational choices structured the decision-making process, now occupational opportunities move to the fore. The returnees need information about the structure of the Bulgarian labour market, job vacancies and possible

wage levels. While there are also individual actors who provide this kind of information, there are influential institutional actors who facilitate return and labour market integration and thus institutionalize social capital and social networks.

One renowned actor in the field of institutionalized transnational social capital in Bulgaria is the NGO Tuk-Tam. Tuk-Tam literally means "here and there" and thus underlines the transnational scope of its work. Tuk-Tam was originally founded by a group of returnees from abroad who reflected on their own difficulties upon return and wanted to support their peers:

> Yeah, and actually it started in 2008, the Tuk-Tam NGO, because we, our founders—seven of them— all came back from the States or from England, and they didn't have their social environment anymore, so they started with these networking events. (E4/5, 139–141)

Today, Tuk-Tam facilitates the whole transnational mobility chain, supporting the preparation of going abroad, the continuation of contacts and networks during the stay abroad, and the facilitation of return. For example, there are regular meetings for students intending to go abroad with returnees who share their experiences. In order to support the connections to Bulgaria during the migratory stay, Tuk-Tam organizes social innovation challenges. Bulgarians abroad can compete with their ideas for social projects in areas such as health, education or civil society development. The winners are supported in the implementation of their idea. Thus, also Bulgarians abroad are encouraged to bring social innovation to Bulgaria. Furthermore, the activities are meant to strengthen their emotional ties to Bulgaria (and thus bonding social capital). The last step in this transnational circuit is the facilitation of return. The NGO organizes career fairs in the major Bulgarian student locations abroad, where Bulgarian migrants can meet recruiters from Bulgaria and learn about job offers and career opportunities. Upon return, there are social events which support returnees to smoothly re-integrate back home, and there are also career fairs to directly meet with the employers.

Regarding this portfolio of activities, it becomes clear that the way social capital is returned and re-implemented is not solely concentrated on individual career development or material improvement, but also has a strong societal component. As a number of our expert interviewees put it, civic engagement can be a way to create meaning in one's life beyond materialistic goals. And given that the low wage level in Bulgaria will probably not trigger return from a Western European country such as Germany for merely economic reasons, post-materialistic goals, connected with entrepreneurial spirit, can become an important incentive for return, as expert E6 argues:

> Because, if all those kids who stay abroad right now, if they know that there are comparable settings for their societal development back home….I think this can be one reason, one more motive to return. (E6, 166–169)

An important prerequisite for the development of return motivations on the basis of a post-materialistic life concept is reflexivity. Reflexivity frequently develops in the context of transnational livelihoods (Saar, 2019; Scheibelhofer, 2009). The opportunity to live in different places across the world raises the awareness of one's individual assets in life. In fact, many of our interviewees addressed their privileged educational experiences from a relational perspective. For some of them, experiences during migration changed their mind-set regarding what could be meaningful in their future life. For example, BUL11, who returned to implement development projects in poor neighbourhoods in Sofia, developed her remigration plans during a business trip to Indonesia, where she realized the extreme poverty in the population and compared it to her own, privileged way of life in Germany. The intention to develop a meaningful occupation developed in the context of her transnational experiences and finally resulted in her return decision. During the interview, she stresses the fact that social engagement has a much stronger impact in a country like Bulgaria with a less developed civil society than in a well-ordered country such as Germany:

> The feeling that I can develop something to improve life here is very good for me. I have a meaningful life here. In Germany, everything is so well organized that I wouldn't even want to change anything. (BUL11, lines 158–165)

The representatives of the NGO Tuk-Tam share this impression. Also for them, the development of social business opportunities is an important motivation for return. In their opinion, a social or entrepreneurial innovation is easier to develop and implement in Bulgaria than in more developed countries. In their view, this fact could explicitly motivate the return of people with entrepreneurial spirit and a big interest in their own personal development.

> Well, there is a lot of work to do here in Bulgaria to make it better. And that's why people who have studied somewhere and see that, "oh, okay, we don't have this yet here in Bulgaria," and they come back and make it.…Maybe it's my stereotype that people who, who want to grow, they are more motivated to come back here. (E4/5, 326–328, 593–594)

As it turns out, activities of transnational social capital transfer are not solely focused on the facilitation of return and thus on individual benefits, but also have a societal component. The activities described above fit well into the concept of social remittances and appear more

clearly when regarded from a transnational research perspective. We saw changes of norms and values, a high self-reflexivity and amounts of social capital which are re-invested in a way that means social innovation can spread in the place of return. From the sending countries' perspective, this might be one of the most promising results from our research.

5. Conclusion

The scope of this article was to reveal how social capital is utilized among transnational migrants and the home and host societies. Taking the example of Bulgarian student migrants in Germany and after their return, this article examined what types of social capital were accumulated, transformed and implemented throughout the migratory trajectory, who profited from the investment, and how.

The research revealed that the accumulation and investment of social capital takes place throughout the migratory trajectory and is strongly embedded in a transnational framework. Social capital accumulation already starts before departure, via institutional or personal connections to Germany, and peers in Bulgaria and in Germany who serve as role models and provide advice and practical help.

The research showed that transnational social capital in the context of student migration is embedded in kinship networks, peer networks and institutionalized networks. All of these serve specific purposes during the migration trajectory. Kinship networks represent strong ties, are "naturally" present and serve as bonding social capital and as a "backup" in the context of biographical uncertainty, which appears in the transition from studies to working life, and during migration (Saar, 2019; Scheibelhofer, 2009). They are specifically influential in return decisions, of which many appeared as spontaneous and poorly prepared. Peer networks, notably networks of former classmates, were found to serve varying purposes during the migration trajectory. Networks of former classmates played a strong role for defining a shared collective identity, and they represented strong emotional attachments among the migrants. While those functions, which represent bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000), were specifically relevant for the emigration decision and the first year abroad, bridging functions of peer networks gained importance during the migratory stay and after return. Also, peer networks were an important source for establishing weak ties to further stakeholders (Granovetter, 1973). Those weak ties, either to individuals or to institutionalized networks, develop throughout the migratory trajectory, based on intentional practices of social capital accumulation. Institutional networks have a strongly bridging function, which help the young migrants to overcome practical obstacles and uncertainty during the various steps in their migration trajectory and status changes. As they are not "naturally" given, these networks need intentional investment, which, as I showed, cannot solely rely on individual motivations, but which are transformed into an institutional structure, such as study associations with paid membership and elected chairs.

The transnational social capital acquired during the migratory stay is implemented in the home country in manifold ways. Within institutionalized networks, it helps returnees to re-integrate and find their way into the Bulgarian labour market. But the social capital investment reaches out beyond those utilitarian goals and encourages investment in activities which are meaningful for civil society development, or for innovative (social) entrepreneurship. The process of giving meaning to civic engagement or social entrepreneurship can be classified as symbolic capital transfer and is connected to a reinterpretation of experiences in the context of transnational migration and the development of post-materialist goals in life (Saar, 2019; Scheibelhofer, 2009). The research showed that transnational social capital is not only implemented to support mobility and integration processes, but that it is also intentionally invested in the home country aiming to support processes of social cohesion. The research showed that the migratory stay enhanced reflexivity among the migrants about social injustice and their own positionality, which gave them a motivation for social engagement back home. This was enforced by the increasing importance of post-materialistic goals and the opportunities of new business options in the field of social entrepreneurship. Thus, return migrants created career opportunities which are meaningful for them and helped them to overcome biographical uncertainties connected to their mobile biography and the ongoing transition of their home country. In this context, social capital helps to manage transformative changes and supports societal modernization processes (Grabowska et al., 2017).

The findings highlighted the importance of a transnational research perspective in migration research and revealed how various forms of social capital are acquired, transformed and implemented throughout a transnational migration trajectory. From a longitudinal perspective, it would be interesting to continue to follow the life course of our interviewees, assuming that the transnational social capital which they acquired will keep its relevance and will trigger further transnational mobilities, or practices. A further follow-up from this research could address how power hierarchies embedded in migration biographies transform over time, related to changing perceptions of migration and its value in the home society.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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