







Reflections on the Emigration Aspirations of Young, Educated People in Small Balkan Countries: A Qualitative Analysis of Reasons to Leave or Stay in North Macedonia

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For small, low-to-middle-income countries such as North Macedonia, the prospect of young, educated people leaving their place of residence (i.e. emigrating) can have significant negative societal-level effects. Understanding the complexity of the brain-drain phenomenon and its antecedents is critical to developing multi-level (i.e. global, societal and individual) strategic solutions. A qualitative analysis of several focus-group interviews was used to understand young, educated residents' reasons either for emigrating or for remaining in North Macedonia. Two overarching themes served to organise the participant-identified drivers for emigration and those opposed to it. Three sub-themes emerged describing the factors for emigration: 1) a lack of professional opportunities, 2) institutional systems, and 3) cultural tightness. Likewise, three sub-themes emerged describing the factors for staying: 1) community, 2) culture and 3) social responsibility. Insights serve to contextualise some of the experiences of young, educated people in small, low-to-middle-income, countries which impact on their emigration decisions.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Balkans, migration aspirations, emigration-decision conflict, brain drain

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Introduction

Mobility is an inherent characteristic of people; individuals often leave their homes in search of a better life, which can include better educational, professional and financial opportunities (IOM 2020). Indeed, Marsella and Ring (2003: 3) suggested that ‘the impulse to migrate is an instinctual and inborn disposition and inclination to wonder and to wander in search of new opportunities and new horizons’. Such is the case when someone moves to a new location in the hope that better opportunities will elevate his or her social status (Rye 2019). At the societal level, such movement – or emigration – when occurring on a larger scale, is not without consequences for the sending countries. While these latter can be identified anywhere along the continuum of economic development, including economically developed countries such as Spain (Domínguez-Mujica, Díaz-Hernández and Parreño-Castellano 2016) or Italy (Dubucs, Pfirsch and Schmoll 2017), emigration can have especially significant consequences for sending countries identified as economically stagnant in their development. What is especially relevant is the emigration of young, skilled professionals (IOM 2020) – a phenomenon which scholars, at times, refer to as ‘brain drain’ (Adeyemi, Joel, Ebenezer and Attah 2018; Beine, Docquier and Rapoport 2008).

Such emigration can have positive global, societal and individual consequences. Docquier and Rapoport (2012) suggested that brain drain is a major aspect of globalisation, with Zhatkanbaeva *et al.* (2012) adding that the mobility of scientific minds is integral to the globalisation of science. At the societal level, such movement of young highly skilled migrants can also benefit both the receiving and the sending countries. Receiving countries benefit from the infusion of such talent to fill high-skilled labour needs (Miao 2021). Sending countries can also benefit from such movement. Adayemi *et al.* (2018) suggested that low- to middle-income countries cannot experience economic growth without the further development of professional, managerial, entrepreneurial and expertise skills, which can be acquired and/or refined in receiving countries. Subsequently, the emigration of educated individuals, according to Israel *et al.* (2019), can also lead to counter-migration or the return of capital. More specifically, brain drain can be further conceptualised as ‘brain training’ (Israel, Cohen and Czamanski 2019), which can have significant positive benefits for the sending country in situations of pronounced return migration. In addition, remittances sent by migrants can be used to boost the lifestyles of family members and can be invested in capital-accumulation projects that can benefit the sending countries (Adayemi *et al.* 2018). These benefits are not just financial and intellectual but can also include positive health outcomes for the returning individuals and their families (Petreski 2021). In general, social remittances in terms of ideas, skills, know-how and practices can benefit both receiving and sending countries (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2010). Furthermore, Docquier and Rapoport (2012) suggest that emigration may contribute to the generation of positive external networks. Finally, benefits can also be experienced at the individual level. As Hendricks (2018) pointed out, worldwide, migrants evaluated their quality of life to be 9 per cent higher after moving abroad.

At the same time, significant drawbacks exist to sending countries with a significant output of young educated and highly skilled capital. Adayemi *et al.* (2018) pointed to the possibility of societal growth becoming stunted when devoid of such talent. Dodani and LaPorte (2005) highlighted the negative impact on the health systems in low-to middle-income countries when highly educated and skilled people emigrate to other countries in search of better economic and professional opportunities. In general, Docquier *et al.* (2007) suggested that brain drain is stronger in smaller countries, with Zhatkanbaeva *et al.* (2012) noting that such brain drain from low-to-middle-income countries is especially worrisome.

Therefore, at the societal level, small countries such as North Macedonia may be especially vulnerable to the negative consequences of such outflows of intellectual capital when emigration is not accompanied by a meaningful return migration (e.g., North Macedonia continues to exhibit a net loss of human capital – see

Janeska, Mojsavska and Lozanoska 2016) or an influx of financial capital (e.g., remittances or investments – Adayemi *et al.* 2018). In fact, the nation's president, Stevo Pendarovski, went as far as to suggest that, at the societal level, the 'emigration of young, skilled professionals [along with pollution] pose[s] the most serious threats North Macedonia faces' (Grant 2019: 1).

Indeed, a study conducted between 2015 and 2017 showed that 52 per cent of highly educated North Macedonian residents hoped to permanently leave the country (Gallup 2018). Similarly, approximately 80 per cent of students studying science, technology and engineering have reported seriously considering leaving the country to live abroad at the end of their studies (Ivanovska, Mojsovski and Kacarska 2019). As a result, the emigration of these youthful, future innovators has the potential to drive a considerable loss of creative capital (WFD 2019). According to the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's report, North Macedonia annually spends between €116 and €433 million on educating and training young individuals who then leave the country. In addition, the decrease in consumption alone from the loss of this human capital contributes to a sizable loss in potential gross domestic product (i.e. €15,850 per working-age emigrant – WFD 2019).

This issue, however, is not unique to North Macedonia. Other countries in the CEE region, both members – e.g. Romania and Bulgaria (Ionescu 2015) and non-members – e.g. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo (Eurostat 2020) and Kazakhstan (Zhatkanbaeva, Zhatkanbaeva and Zhatkanbaev 2012) of the European Union alike – have experienced similar emigration concerns. Due to its significance and complexity, it is unsurprising that the phenomenon has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines (Krieger 2004; Kvedaraite, Baksys, Repečkienė and Glinskienė 2015; Lee, Carling and Orrenius 2014). Yet, despite the widespread interest in the migration process, social scientists and policymakers alike have a limited understanding of the mechanisms responsible for generating and sustaining migration patterns (Carling and Collins 2018). The prevailing assumption in the existing migration literature is that young people gravitate towards higher-income countries in search of better economic and employment opportunities (e.g. Koleša 2019), as well as more advantageous political and socio-economic structures (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1993). On the other hand, what may motivate these young people to stay in their countries of origin are the social bonds tying them to their local communities (Boswell 2002). Yet, the simple identification of the antecedents leading to, or preventing, emigration has been criticised for presenting the problem as a static process (Carling and Collins 2018; Van Hear, Bakewell and Long 2012), thus failing to account for changing motives (de Haas 2011) and largely ignoring the precise causal mechanisms (Hagen-Zanker 2015) leading to, or preventing, emigration. Instead, a more nuanced understanding of this process – contextualised through the expressed experiences of young people contemplating emigration – may allow for the better development of programmes, policies and strategies that target the antecedents to emigration and enable opportunities for young people to reach their full potential in their countries of origin, thereby slowing down or reversing the patterns of emigration for societies in which the negative consequences of emigration, at the societal level, outnumber the positive ones (Adayemi *et al.* 2018; Zhatkanbaeva *et al.* 2012).

Through a qualitative exploration of the experiences of young, highly educated North Macedonian residents, this study explores the presence of the above-listed factors which are suggested to influence emigration decisions and aspirations in addition to other potential factors that may impact on the emigration decision process. As King and Oruc (2019) have suggested, currently, there is an inadequate understanding of the complex attitudes and experiences of young people, such as young Macedonians, as they consider leaving their home country. This study was designed to contextualise some of these experiences for young, educated people residing in a small, low-to-middle-income countries such as North Macedonia and to further our understanding

of the antecedents influencing emigration decisions as a precursor to developing sensible and effective strategies, programmes and policy that may generate a meaningful positive impact on the patterns of emigration at both the individual and the societal levels.

The drivers for emigration

The extant literature points to numerous potential drivers of emigration experienced at the individual and/or societal levels (Boswell 2002) and covering a myriad of issues associated with the sending country, such as education (IOM 2020), economic instability, poverty or crime (Parkins 2010). For instance, some of the strongest drivers thought to impact on the decisions of young, highly educated people to emigrate include the sending country's lack of economic and employment opportunities (IOM 2020; Koleša 2019) and the political and socio-economic structures associated with these countries (Massey *et al.* 1993).

Although scholars are beginning to have a clearer picture of what generally contributes to emigration aspirations and intentions, the literature remains fragmented and largely assumes that motivations stem from economic reasoning (Williams, Jephcote, Janta and Li 2018). Indeed, stagnant employment opportunities and inadequate living standards in a person's home country have largely been regarded as important indicators of intentions to emigrate (Parkins 2010; Williams *et al.* 2018). Generally, it seems that the promise of better wages and improved employment conditions in receiving countries influences emigration aspirations (Aslany, Carling, Mjelva and Sommerfelt 2021) and decisions (Lowell 2009). Indeed, in a comprehensive systematic review of the determinants of migration aspirations, Aslany and her colleagues (2021) discovered that the aspiration to emigrate had a negative relationship with employment status, where a greater aspiration to emigrate was associated with a higher level of unemployment. Thus, when individuals' cost analyses suggest a positive differential income in favour of moving abroad, an important condition is met that elicits enduring migration patterns, persisting as long as wage and employment inequality persists (Hagen-Zanker 2015; Rakauskienė and Ranceva 2014). As Kvedaraite and her colleagues (2015: 197) surmised, a 'willingness to have an economic freedom' and a 'rise on a career ladder' are important determinants of emigration. As such, we advance our first research question:

RQ1: *Do young educated North Macedonian residents consider the current economic and employment opportunities as potential drivers for emigration?*

The political (Ambroso 2006; Efendic 2016; Rakauskienė and Ranceva 2014) and socio-economic structures also influence emigration decisions (Massey *et al.* 1993). Structural factors, such as poverty, economic development, changing demographic trends (EU Science Hub 2018) or policy (Ambroso 2006; Efendic 2016) present some of the more common drivers of emigration. Yet, structural problems are not limited to matters of policy and economics. Other structural issues perceived as deficient in societies, such as security, human rights, environmental degeneration, climate change, infrastructure, transportation quality, communications and information can also drive people away from their countries of origin (Van Hear *et al.* 2012). Indeed, Aslany *et al.*'s aforementioned systematic review of the literature found convincing evidence that increased perceptions of corruption and the low quality of a country's security, public services, healthcare, public institutions and education all increase aspirations for individuals to emigrate from their current country.

Through the shared experiences of young, educated residents of North Macedonia, this investigation also explored what structural issues, if any, increase aspirations or considerations for emigration from a small, low-to-middle-income country such as North Macedonia. As such, we advance our second research question:

RQ2: *Do young educated North Macedonian residents consider the current country of origin's structural inefficiencies as potential drivers for emigration?*

As suggested in this review, while economic issues and structural inefficiencies may be important drivers of the decision to emigrate, other factors may also play an important role. What role, if any, would these additional factors play with young, educated professionals residing in a low-to-middle-income country such as North Macedonia in cultivating their aspiration to emigrate? To pursue these inquiries, we propose our third research question:

RQ3: *What additional drivers for emigration – aside from economic and structural ones – do young educated North Macedonian residents consider?*

The drivers *against* emigration

While a number of drivers may elicit considerations for young, educated professionals to emigrate abroad, some factors have the opposite effect as they contribute to immobility (Schewel 2020) and a desire to remain. In fact, strong social bonds, close familial relationships or significant community involvement offer strong reasons to stay and forego emigration (Boswell 2002). Indeed, a strong satisfaction with community relationships has been associated with diminishing effects on aspirations (Aslany *et al.* 2021) and intentions to emigrate (Williams *et al.* 2018). Similarly, strong family attachments or the importance of family, has also been connected with lower intentions to migrate (Van Mol 2016). Discussing the reasons for the reverse-emigration of Polish women, Duda-Mikulin (2018) also noted the need to take care of elderly parents as an important concern impacting on emigration decisions. Thus, the strength of familial relationships, connections and community engagement may counteract the desire to emigrate. As such, this investigation explores the impact of social bonds on the decisions to emigrate, as captured through the experiences of young, educated professionals residing in a low-to-middle-income country such as North Macedonia and prompts our fourth research question:

RQ4: *Do young, educated North Macedonian residents consider social bonds to present a potential deterrent to emigration?*

The social bonds that tie individuals to their country of origin through close familial relationships and community engagement may only provide a limited insight into the primary reasons which young, educated professionals in countries such as North Macedonia use to convince themselves to forego emigration. What other drivers against emigration, if any, would these residents cite as factors motivating them to remain in their place of residence? To explore these issues, we advance the final question of this investigation:

RQ5: *What additional drivers against emigration – aside from social bonds – do young, educated North Macedonian residents consider?*

Against the backdrop of exploring questions targeting the different potential drivers both for and against emigration, it is worth noting that scholars investigating the patterns of migration largely discourage theoretical exclusivity; instead, most acknowledge that 'causal processes relevant to international migration might operate on multiple levels simultaneously' (Massey *et al.* 1993: 455). Thus, even though we highlight each of the

drivers introduced in this investigation separately so that we can study them in greater detail, the drivers of migration often overlap and occur in mutually influencing patterns (Carling and Collins 2018).

Method

This study is the first in North Macedonia to simultaneously analyse reasons for both leaving and for remaining in the country; additionally, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the factors impacting on emigration in North Macedonia from a qualitative perspective, as all of the previous studies relied on historical data or quantitative measures. As such, focus groups were used to understand young residents' motivations to emigrate or to remain in North Macedonia. While they may lack the significant depth afforded by in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions provide a distinct advantage over in-depth interviews and traditional self-report methods as they reveal intrapersonal insights from dynamic group interactions (Morgan 2019).

Four focus groups ($N=4$) included a convenience sample of undergraduate students ($N=26$) recruited from a business course at a large public university in North Macedonia. In order to facilitate conversations, heterogeneous groups were divided based on their responses to a filter survey, in which they indicated whether they planned to remain or to leave North Macedonia during the next year ($N=13$ intend to stay; $N=13$ intend to leave). Recruitment continued on a rolling basis until we reached a point of saturation with the data (Morgan 2019). The focus groups lasted between 38 and 82 minutes ($M=54$ minutes) and the participants ranged in age from 21 to 26 ($M=23.47$). All the participants identified as Caucasian.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured interview protocol, which was developed based on previous literature (Morgan 1997). The questions focused on the participants' plans after graduation and for the future. We also asked about what or who influenced their decisions regarding their future plans. In addition we asked, when they pictured their future, if they saw themselves in North Macedonia. Lastly, we asked them to describe the reasons why they did or did not picture themselves in North Macedonia. There was little debate in the focus groups about whether they would remain in or leave North Macedonia; stated differently, there were two groups clearly represented. As such, much of the conversation centred around the reasons why they wanted to leave or remain in the country.

University IRB approval was received prior to the commencement of the project and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The first author, a trained interviewer, conducted the focus groups via Zoom. The moderator was not the students' instructor and, as such, the students did not receive class credit for their participation. The focus groups were video-recorded with participant permission and transcribed verbatim. A codebook was developed inductively from the data by the research team. Two graduate assistants coded the one transcript together, achieving a 98 per cent average inter-rater agreement. The rest of the transcripts were coded separately.

For this project, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for thematic analysis was applied, which includes familiarity with the data, the generating of initial codes, the searching for themes, the reviewing of themes, the defining and naming of themes and the production of the report. This is an inductive thematic analysis and patterns were sought related to the research questions posed in the literature review. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and gaining consensus by the team.

Findings

During the focus groups, we talked to young people about the reasons why they considered remaining in or leaving their birthplace of North Macedonia. Two overarching themes emerged, which address the consideration factors for emigrating and for remaining. From the overarching theme related to the drivers *for* emigration,

three sub-themes emerged which describe the reasons why people considered emigrating. The following themes were identified as factors which participants examined as part of their consideration to leave North Macedonia: a lack of professional opportunities, institutional systems and cultural tightness. From the overarching theme related to the drivers *against* emigration, three sub-themes also emerged, characterising the consideration factors for remaining in North Macedonia. The following themes were identified as factors examined by participants as part of their decision to stay in their home country: community, culture and social responsibility. First, we discuss the factors which young people consider when deciding to emigrate.

Consideration factors for emigrating: pushing away from frustrations

As previously mentioned, three themes – a lack of professional opportunities, institutional systems and cultural tightness – emerged as significant factors examined by young, educated residents of North Macedonia when considering emigration. Throughout the focus groups the young people discussed their satisfaction with particular locations they had visited in the past and their desire and aspirations for educational opportunities; hence, it is worth noting that, while discussions of particular locations did not emerge as themes, they are often incorporated into the narratives of the participants.

A lack of professional opportunities

The focus-group participants indicated that they consider leaving North Macedonia because of the perceived limited economic opportunities for financial security or professional growth. As this young student stated,

I'm about to graduate in a few months. And I feel like I have no options. For example, if you took the job industry, let's say I'm feeling like I have 10 companies, maybe 20 companies that I'm about to choose from, or maybe... like I have no goal for me to work here. As simple as that.

The young people generally believed that there are more opportunities abroad for employment, volunteering and economic advancement. Participants often shared their opinion that they felt the gains would be greater for the same input if they went abroad – ‘... it plays a big part, and finances are a big thing that maybe if we go abroad then, like, for the same hours of working, we could get a better salary’. Another participant added: ‘I think one of the biggest reasons why people want to move elsewhere is really about money, because, if you can earn more, you will probably have a better quality of life’. In sum, participants described life abroad as offering opportunities that they believed would be constrained by remaining in the home country.

The above are just a few of many similar exemplars provided by the participants and suggesting that the perceived lack of professional opportunities – independent of perceived societal structural issues – kindles these young, educated people’s aspirations to emigrate. Indeed, the perception of the lack of professional (i.e. economic and employment) opportunities was continuously mentioned as an indisputable driver inciting young, educated North Macedonian residents to consider emigrating from their country of birth. As such, these findings are consistent with the current literature, which suggests that individuals with limited employment and advancement opportunities show greater aspirations to emigrate to places that offer greater opportunities (Aslany *et al.* 2021). In addition, the current findings also provide further evidence of the complexity of linearly correlating the impact of income on the aspiration to emigrate, as low-income earners may not represent the predominant drivers of income-based migration (Aslany *et al.* 2021). Instead, the aspiration to emigrate – which can drive mobility – may be based on the opportunity for a person to improve his or her earnings by

relocating to areas with higher pay for comparable services (Aslany *et al.* 2021; Hagen-Zanker 2015; Rakauskienė and Ranceva 2014). As such, the perceived benefit of emigration at the individual level – in this case professional development and financial gain – is clearly visible through the participants’ responses, thus reiterating the complex relationship and balance between individual and societal consequences of emigration.

The institutional system

Participants reported considering leaving the country because they are frustrated with society and various institutions in North Macedonia, including politics, healthcare, education and pollution. Participants suggested that life in North Macedonia is difficult, as even simple things are challenging to accomplish, thus constraining their agency to achieve their desired tasks. As one participant suggested:

...I wouldn't want my kid to be born here or kids and have a Macedonian passport. I had the opportunity to go to South Korea for an exchange programme and I couldn't go because my passport was Macedonian. So, I had to get a Bulgarian passport which I do not want to do. This is still my country.

In these words, there are traces of an emotional struggle where the young person found that it was necessary to attain another country’s citizenship just to be able to freely travel in pursuit of opportunities and happiness.

Some of the participants squarely placed the blame on the government, infrastructure and system in place:

...the systemic corruption, cultural deficiency and, let's say, business innovation stagnation (...) because if you have an innovative idea, it's pretty tough to execute it from here because getting funding and everything else (...) it's definitely limited.

Alas, while all of the students were close to completing their college degrees, not all felt that they were in a system that would allow for innovation and opportunity. Furthermore, they repeatedly referenced the perceived corruption in the country and the supposed inability of the system to repair itself. As one young person reiterated:

...the corruption, low level of education, the bad health system, the bad (...) all the bad influences, actually, inside the society and inside the country. That makes the system, like the whole system, like, broken.

The perceived lack of innovation and corruption left them frustrated and feeling that there were more opportunities for them in other places, as it was not just the economic barriers that kept them from envisioning a future for themselves in North Macedonia but also the perceived systemic issues that made life challenging. They also discussed their impression of what they considered to be the country’s issue with pollution, as one participant suggested: ‘The problem is actual and it’s here’. Participants also shared their sentiments regarding how pollution would impact on them and their future families throughout their lives, as another participant surmised: ‘I would definitely like for my children to not go through their developing years with heavy air pollution’. North Macedonia is one of the most polluted countries in Europe (IQAir 2019) and this was frequently cited as a reason to consider leaving the country.

In addition, there was general dissatisfaction with the health care and medical coverage provided in North Macedonia, as summarised by this participant:

Let's say, if you work hard, you become a high class. You still, if you want to, for example, get your medical needs satisfied, on a more higher standard, this is not possible in Macedonia, because you have a few sectors which are privatised, then definitely up to par with most developed countries' medical sectors. But, for example, I know that the infection sector that treats viruses and such (...) there's no privatised sector for this. This is only statewide. So, even if you're willing to pay a lot of money to get better treatment, you're not able to.

Thus, as illustrated in this quote, even for individuals who are not economically disadvantaged, life in North Macedonia may be less satisfying due to the perceived lack of quality healthcare, which provides young, educated residents with a reason to consider emigrating.

Overall, there was a sense that the dissatisfaction with public institutions was a key factor in their decision-making. One participant articulated his concerns about the various institutions and how they are perceived to interfere with residents' growth and upward mobility:

So, basically, it's not just about education. It's also about the healthcare. It's also about the political structure. It's like, if you don't want to be in a political party, you're not going to get a job. And if you don't do this, you're not going to get also a job. And so the political reason is mostly the reason why people like me and my colleagues over here are trying to leave this country.

A poignant statement by a young woman reiterates this point clearly: 'Politics corrupt every aspect of our life'. Hence, the supposed institutional instability in the country, along with the impression of lack of opportunities for professional development tied to perceived corruption and other structural barriers, provided a significant motivation for moving away from North Macedonia.

The frustration with these issues was evident from the focus groups as the participants oscillated between being displeased with the factors perceived to provide them with what they saw to be legitimate reasons to leave their country and lamenting the perceived lack of opportunities that would allow them to stay home: 'I just hope I can give my kids more opportunities than I had'.

Overall, this theme provided an answer to the second research question by clearly indicating that people's impressions of North Macedonia's structural inefficiencies are a strong contributing factor in the aspiration and desire of young, educated residents to emigrate. The decision to leave their place of residence was not easy, as it represented a conscious struggle (e.g. '...this is my country...') as these young people were not thinking only of their own futures but also of those of their future families (e.g. 'We cannot have children or give them everything they want'). These findings closely align with the extant literature that shows a positive relationship between the perceived corruption and dissatisfaction with public services (e.g., healthcare, public institutions and education) on the one hand and the aspiration to emigrate on the other (Aslany *et al.* 2021). At the same time, the participant responses highlight the complexity of emigration decisions where the potential conflict of benefits vs costs is not limited to a debate between societal-level loss (e.g., the loss of human capital) and individual-level gain (e.g., greater opportunities abroad), a frequent focal point of brain-drain discussions (e.g., Zhatkanbaeva *et al.* 2012). Conflict is also experienced at the individual level, where individual benefits (e.g., greater opportunities abroad) are offset by individual costs (e.g. not wanting to leave their home country and extended family behind).

Cultural tightness

The focus-group participants indicated that they felt frustrated with the perceived close-mindedness of North Macedonian society. They suggested that the rigid cultural norms, as they perceived them, provide clearly established behavioural expectations. Violating such traditions, according to our participants, is not tolerated and is regarded as socially deviant behaviour. The concept of cultural tightness perhaps best describes this experience. Cultural tightness is defined as ‘the strength of social norms and degree of sanctioning within society’ (Gelfand, Nishii and Raver 2006: 1226). Dunaetz (2019) defines tight cultures as ‘cultures having strong expectations concerning adherence to social norms and little tolerance for deviance from them’ (p. 410). Consistent with this description, one participant suggested, ‘So basically, if we’re still in the phase where, if someone gets a tattoo, it means that they’re a drug addict or something like that. So, basically, our society is not open-minded. It’s just a straight path and they don’t look left or right’. Essentially, participants showed their frustration with the status quo, as one participant shared this sentiment: ‘...if you do something off the beaten track, you’re just like an outsider’. Another participant added: ‘I’m feeling very limited here. Like, I have no options’.

Frequently, participants suggested that it is the combination of what they saw to be perceived intolerance and the culturally normalised practice of figurative suffocation that is so hard to bear. Thus, they expressed a longing for a different lifestyle, which they perceived could take place beyond the country’s borders. As one participant said:

I appreciate more the way that, for example, in Germany, how people are not concerned about you and about what you do. They are not so, like, curious about your life and everything. You can just be whoever you are and here it’s not like that.

Thus, participants felt suffocated by the supposed rigid rules and the roles which they were expected to neatly occupy. They felt that it was hard to function under the apparent constant scrutiny of their actions, which did not adhere to perceived culturally accepted norms. They described this suffocation as a situation whereby their fellow North Macedonian residents were seemingly always getting involved in other people’s business, as this participant illustrated: ‘I don’t like that people are interested in your life more than you, and everyone is looking at what you’re doing, but they don’t look after themselves’. As the young people suggested, this cultural tightness left them feeling isolated and hopeless: ‘So many toxic things that you have to undergo that eventually you get really tired of it’. Another participant added: ‘It’s not that we cannot have kids or give them everything they want... we just don’t want them to grow up in this kind of closed-minded society’. Indeed, the young people felt as if they could not be themselves. As one participant surmised: ‘Why fight if eventually no-one is going to listen to your voice, even if it’s the right thing’.

The third research question asked whether reasons other than economic (professional) and structural would emerge as drivers for emigration by young, educated residents. The current theme shows that the perceived cultural tightness is frustrating for these young people and is seemingly providing a good reason for them to consider leaving their place of residence. The perceived intolerance of any deviation from rigid cultural norms, coupled with what was perceived to be consistent close behavioural scrutiny has seemingly created a suffocating desire for young, educated residents of North Macedonian to seek freedom from judgment and close behavioural monitoring elsewhere. The findings from this theme align with multiple areas of the current literature (e.g., Aslany *et al.* 2021; Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019). As demonstrated in one of the above quotes, clear admiration was shown for a possible emigration destination (i.e. Germany). Aslany and her colleagues’ (2021)

findings suggest that positive perceptions about a target destination directly correlate with aspirations to emigrate, thus the participant's desire to relocate as a solution to current concerns is in line with the extant literature. In addition, culturally established norms and values have shown a propensity to influence peoples' desire to move. Individuals who are more pessimistic about the future and the possibility of timely cultural change are also more likely to show a desire to seek better opportunities abroad (Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019), as did the participants quoted here.

The above themes present three clear drivers that would appear to impact on young people considering emigration. Participants who considered remaining in the home country identified multiple factors that can impact on immobility decisions. The next section focuses on these factors as exemplified in the emergent themes.

Consideration factors for staying: the draw of social connections and opportunities

Our young, educated North Macedonian participants highlighted a number of potential factors that may impact on their decision to remain in their place of residence. These immobility factors included community, culture and social responsibility. We now examine each factor in turn.

Community

Family members, friends and romantic partners – among others who would continue to live in their home country – were a major inspiration for deciding to forego emigration. As this young resident told us: '...the great network of people I have made over all these years of high school and college (...) if you leave the country, you can lose this'. Frequently, these young, educated participants echoed concerns about the loneliness and isolation they might feel when living away from those they love, should they decide to emigrate: 'The thought of being far away would bring me a lot more worries and, yes, the digital age would give me the opportunity to communicate, but having the people you love out of reach would make me, I think, feel more lonely'.

The young residents also conveyed to us that they would prefer to stay in North Macedonia because they have established certain professional relationships with businesses, through internships or working with others. As this young man asserted, young people's relationships were tied to North Macedonia and they did not want to have to rebuild those social connections:

I think that this is the reason I want to stay here because, with my friends or someone I know, I can trust them. I've been with them here and I know their parents, their friends, etc. And I think that if I move away from my country, I would need a lot more time to trust them and to work with somebody.

They had developed contacts over time and often mentioned the word 'trust' when describing those relationships: 'I personally think that, for every job, you need the right people whom you can trust and, me personally, I need a long amount of time to be with someone and trust them fully'.

It is important to note that these young people were not concerned about making friends in new places. They often told the focus group that they knew people in other places or knew there were large populations of individuals with shared cultures (i.e. from the Balkan peninsula) around the world. However, they believed that the bonds and status they had attained at home could not be replicated:

Wherever you go, there are Balkan communities that you can adapt in. So, let's say in Chicago, there are 2 million Balkan people, so yes, you can find friends with your culture over there, but it's not always what drives people forward... to leave or not to leave. It's not always culture... maybe the social status that they'll have to build again and stuff like that.

Thus, what mattered to them was being in the same location with the people they care about, as this young woman articulated: 'The feeling that you belong somewhere because everybody you love is there'.

Thus, the perceived sense of community (i.e. the established social bonds) provided an important consideration when thinking of remaining in North Macedonia. As such, this theme closely mapped onto the fourth research question which inquired whether social bonds present a relevant consideration for young, educated North Macedonian residents when deciding whether or not to emigrate. The experiences of these young people, as here exemplified, demonstrate that their connection with the community – their social bonds – was a clear factor to be considered for remaining in their current place of residence. This finding is consistent with the extant literature, which shows social attachments to have a negative correlation with individuals' aspirations to emigrate (Aslany *et al.* 2021). Past findings also show that the presence of strong migration networks or extensive and well-established diasporas (Van Hear 1998), can have a positive correlation with people's aspiration to migrate (Aslany *et al.* 2021). However, our study also shows that a strong sense of community in the sending country may be able to negate the emigration pull of well-established migration networks in the target country.

The perceived community, however, was not the only reason influencing young people to remain in North Macedonia. The perceived close identification with the culture also provided a strong social connection and a potential reason to remain at home, as the next theme suggests.

Culture

Participants communicated their sense of comfort in the culture and day-to-day life to which they are accustomed in North Macedonia. 'I feel good here with my life. If I leave, I don't think I'll manage'. This comfort could include food, culture or any of the privileges that come from being part of the native population in one's birthplace. The young people described their satisfaction with their home country and their pride in their place of birth: 'I really think that I am, I mean, I really like my culture where... I really like to stay where I was born'. Evident from the quotes was the strong cultural identity displayed by the participants, as evidenced by this young man's words:

One of my colleagues and friends left the country and, before he left, it was for work. He also lived in European country, and he wanted to disappear from here and everything in between. But when he went there, he realized that his daily life is not the same as here... He feels like a robot. He told me that. And after maybe a year or something like that, he changed his mind. So, I think that most of the young people don't get that.

Hence, they frequently articulated that they wanted to stay where they were comfortable and could enjoy life. Moreover, they felt that making a life in a new place would mean starting over and would take time.

[S]taying in the country... it is a good opportunity for the rest of us because if you can find a way to earn enough money here, you have probably a better lifestyle than you would have in the States... because you're a foreigner in the country and have to adapt to the value of the country.

As such, they did not see a strong reason to move away and make this transition. Along these lines, they said that they were not interested in adapting to another culture or becoming someone new, as exemplified here:

I would like to also mention the culture shock. I don't think it has to do with leaving your comfort zone, but the thought that I should shake my cultural values and adjust in another... in something different, in a different culture, it's not how I see myself, for example in 10 years. And it's not how I see my kids living, because we are, as my colleagues already said... it is the trust and it's not all about the comfort zone. It's about the thing that I would have to... shape myself into something different, where I don't feel like I belong.

In sum, at least part of their perceived identity seemed to be tied to their host culture and living as an emigrant was not desirable; they did not see the benefits to be outweighing the costs. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that subjective well-being, or a high satisfaction and happiness with one's current life, is negatively associated with emigration aspirations (Aslany *et al.* 2021), thus contributing to the immobility of current residents in North Macedonia.

This theme closely mapped on to the fifth research question, which asked whether there were additional salient drivers – aside from the perceived importance of social bonds – considered by young, educated people from North Macedonia encouraging them to remain in their country of residence. Yet, it is important to note that there was a close connection between the last two themes, culture and community, as the close social bonds and ties to community appear rooted in the cultural norms which place emphasis on relationships. In addition to these two themes, young, educated North Macedonian residents also stated that they felt a personal obligation to help propel the country in a more positive direction. Thus, our next theme relates to the young residents' perceived sense of social responsibility.

Social responsibility

Individuals in our focus groups reported that their desire to remain is tied to their perceived obligation and duty to improve North Macedonia, as this young person indicated: 'I see my country on the wrong path. I want to participate and make it right'. Young, educated residents believed in their ability to change the direction in which the country was headed and saw it as their responsibility to do so:

Because many, many more people are living in despair or disappointed with the place they are in, and I see that like, a main, main problem for leaving our country. I can speak about myself. I see myself here in Macedonia and I don't want to leave... permanently leave my country, because I see that, with young people like us, we can change the environment, we can change the country.

The goal of making a difference and creating a good life in North Macedonia for themselves and others was articulated throughout the focus groups. Those who wished to remain in the country believed in their ability to both drive and facilitate change, as this young man described it:

I want to stay in North Macedonia, and I think that we, the youth, are an important group of people who can make changes in the future and make North Macedonia great again. Somehow, because I think that we don't have a lot of opportunities and, when we finish our studies, we're not equal, so, we should somehow change this, and maybe more of the students will decide to stay here and to be part of this country... and contribute to North Macedonia.

The possibility of change over time with regard to community and societal conditions generally has shown a negative association with aspirations to emigrate (Aslany *et al.* 2021). Thus, a lack of desire to emigrate on the part of local residents should suggest a more optimistic view of North Macedonia's future. Yet, our study participants did not express such optimism in things changing for the better on their own, unless they themselves engaged as active participants in the process. These young people hoped to build a better future for their country by being a part of the solution. As such, perceived social responsibility emerged as an additional theme delivering an answer to the final research question in this investigation. Thus, community, culture and social responsibility provided three salient themes contributing to young, educated North Macedonian residents' decisions to remain in their home country.

Discussion

The emigration of educated young people can have significant global, societal and individual effects. At the societal level, it impacts on both the sending and the receiving countries, producing both positive (e.g., remittances, financial investments, brain training, network building, etc. – Adayemi *et al.* 2018) and negative (e.g., loss of intellectual capital – Adayemi *et al.* 2018; Zhatkanbaeva *et al.* 2012) outcomes, thus highlighting the fact that this phenomenon is neither exclusively positive nor exclusively negative. However, the negative consequences of emigration, at the societal level have the potential to significantly impact on small, low-to-middle-income countries (Adayemi *et al.* 2018; Zhatkanbaeva *et al.* 2012) when unaccompanied by a meaningful counter-migration. Indeed, to the extent that it propels a nation's president to declare the issue as one of the two most significant challenges facing the nation – as in the case of North Macedonia (Grant 2019) – the emigration of young people can present a significant societal challenge that may inspire the development of and investment in programmes, strategies and policies aimed at slowing down or reversing the emigration trend (Zhatkanbaeva *et al.* 2012).

Yet, the societal outcomes of emigration do not always match its impact at the individual level. For example, while the departure of young, educated talent may have a negative impact on critical institutions in the sending country (e.g. Dodani and LaPorte 2005), the impact at the individual level may be quite positive, if filled with greater professional and financial opportunities for the departing individuals. Furthermore, family or community members may also benefit from the remittances sent back by the emigrating individuals. Therefore policies, strategies and programmes that ignore the complexity of the issue run the risk of overlooking the individual-level antecedents leading to emigration and, as such, jeopardise the opportunity to produce real solutions with a multi-level (e.g., societal and individual), rather than just societal-level, impact. Without addressing the individual concerns that impact on emigration decisions, a positive solution to emigration may be elusive. As such, the efficacy of the above-mentioned approaches rests on a proficient understanding of the considerations that influence young, educated residents' decisions to move away from or to remain in their home country. Yet, as King and Oruc (2019) argued, there is a lack of clear understanding of the complexity driving young people's attitudes and shaping their experiences as they contend with the decision of whether or not to leave their home country. This is not to suggest that such drivers influencing people to move towards, for example, professional opportunities (Koleša 2019) and socio-economic structures (Massey *et al.* 1993) or away from, for example, social bonds (Boswell 2002) have not been identified in the literature. Rather, it indicates a need for a more thorough exploration into the contextualised experiences of young, educated people residing in low-to-middle-income countries, such as North Macedonia, in order to better understand the precise drivers of emigration patterns.

This study has provided a qualitative exploration, through thematic analysis, of the specific emigration drivers identified by young, educated residents of North Macedonia. Altogether, two overarching themes

emerged from the study, one dealing with the reasons which young, educated residents gave for considering leaving the country and the other covering the reasons given for remaining at home. Each of these overarching themes was supported by three specific drivers. The three salient reasons which the young people gave for considering emigration were the perceived lack of professional opportunities in the home country, the insufficiency of the current institutional systems and the cultural tightness of the people in North Macedonia. What the young people frequently spoke of was their frustration with the seemingly limited economic and employment opportunities in the country, which did not necessarily match their training and skills and did not, ostensibly, provide great prospects for professional growth and advancement. The participants also discussed in great depth what they perceived to be the inefficiency of the home country's current institutional systems, spanning educational deficiencies, political corruption, rampant pollution and inadequate healthcare. While these drivers have been identified in the literature as some of the primary drivers for emigration in general (Koleša 2019; Massey *et al.* 1993), through the shared experiences of young, educated North Macedonian residents, this study has shown just how strongly these factors are experienced and the passion which they can generate when people are considering the potential to emigrate. The third emergent theme – which we named cultural tightness – evidenced a clear discontent with what was perceived as rigid cultural norms and behavioural expectations that are presumably rooted in the culture of the homeland. According to those participants intent on leaving the country, should a person stray away from the perceived rigid cultural norms, being labelled as 'deviant' was interpreted as a sign of intolerance in a culturally overbearing and suffocating society. As a result, young, educated people were in search of what they felt was a cultural refuge and the opportunity for individual expression free from judgment. Thus, the perceived lack of professional opportunities, inefficient institutional systems and cultural tightness of its residents seem to be three strong motivations influencing the decisions of young, educated residents of North Macedonia on whether or not to emigrate.

The sense of community, on the other hand, presented an important pull factor convincing young, educated people to remain in their place of residence. Identified as such in previous research (Boswell 2002) and emerging as a clear theme in this exploration, the social bonds, prestige and status formed in the community were clear drivers against emigration as expressed by the young residents – sacrificing and leaving behind these social bonds was not an option for many of them. As Mata-Codesal (2015) noted, some individuals feel the pull to remain in the home country to be a conscious decision, either because they have a stable income and can qualify for visas or simply because they do not see their situation as a burden. The sense of community was intertwined with the second emergent theme against emigration – the home country's culture. In general, young people had strong reservations when it came to leaving their culture and communities behind. Many participants felt that it was too much of a sacrifice to leave behind their friends, families, established roles and connections and way of life. Several scholars have noted that social structures are highly valued and cannot be underestimated in migration decisions (see Schewel 2020). The price of starting anew was just not one they were willing to pay in relocating abroad. The final emergent theme provided a glimpse of hope for the country and its future as the young people cited their societal responsibility as a major reason for remaining at home and facing the country's challenges. Our young, educated participants suggested that they are aware of the perceived problems facing the nation and they want to be a part of the solution. They indicated their willingness to help to resolve the challenges that act as important push factors prompting young, educated people to move away from the country.

Overall, this exploratory investigation has provided a solid insight into the reasons voiced by young, educated North Macedonian residents for wanting to (a) move away from or (b) remain at home in, the republic. Some of these drivers were identified in earlier literature and closely mapped onto the findings of this study. Even so, it is important to remember that decisions to emigrate are complex and may not necessarily rest on

a single factor. Instead, it is probable that they ‘operate on multiple levels simultaneously’ (Massey *et al.* 1993: 455) as they frequently overlay and transpire in reciprocally influencing patterns (Carling and Collins 2018). Frustration with the perceived lack of employment opportunities in the sending country, for example, may be met with an equally strong perception of such opportunities existing in the receiving country, enthusiastically shared by emigrants settled in the origin country. Thus, the push (i.e. lack of employment opportunities) factor in the home country is simultaneously reinforced by a pull factor from the receiving country (i.e. emigrants sharing stories of employment opportunities). In this case one factor reinforced the other. In other situations, the two factors may be in opposition to one another. For example, the perceived social and cultural pull of the home country, which encourages young people to remain home, may be offset by an equal or even stronger pull coming from the close bonds and cultural unity expressed by migrants from the same culture who have previously settled in the host country.

Altogether, the study highlights the internal strife which young people face when making such complex and life-changing decisions. While the homogeneous composition of the two types of focus group led to discussions that were primarily focused either on reasons for and the possibility of leaving or staying in the home country, the themes uncovered in this study point to a potential internal conflict that young people experience when making such complex decisions. This renders the phenomenon of emigration and, consequently, of brain drain akin to a wicked problem – a constellation of deeply entangled social issues or crises that may be difficult or impossible to isolate, define or solve due to, at times, their conflicting nature (Rittel and Weber 1973). For example, an intellectual-capital void created in the sending country may fill such a void experienced in the receiving country. Therefore, ostensibly ‘solving’ the problem in the sending country by retaining the intellectual capital at home leads to a new problem for the receiving country. This is one aspect in which the wicked emigration issue can be conceptualised, analysed and considered at both societal and global levels.

Another important aspect is tied to the individual level. For example, in the current study, an internal battle seems to ensue for young, educated residents of North Macedonia, a battle in which they want to leave the country in an attempt to escape the perceived rigid behavioural expectations stemming from the cultural tightness permeating the societal culture but, at the same time, also want to remain home and influence cultural change. They want to emigrate to provide better financial and intellectual opportunities for themselves and their future children while equally wanting to remain home where they and their future children would experience the benefits of close familial and societal bonds. Finally, the young people want to escape the inefficiencies and corruption of the institutional systems but, at the same time, feel a social responsibility to remain home and correct these inefficiencies and root out corruption.

While the exact drivers that impact on emigration decisions may differ from one society to the next, the internal battles faced are not unique to North Macedonian residents. As such, they underscore the importance of policymakers, strategists and programme-planners familiarising themselves with the pressing issues facing young people at the individual level, so that proposed societal-level solutions are consistent with the promotion of individual-level goals and objectives if they are to yield long-term success.

Conclusion and strategic considerations

As this investigation has asserted, emigration – and consequently brain drain – is an inherently complex phenomenon that is neither positive nor negative as it can be both simultaneously, no matter whether the consideration is taken at the global, the societal or the individual level. In some circumstances – especially with small, low-to-middle-income countries where the phenomenon features a significant exit of young educated talent – the perceived negative societal-level outcomes can lead a country to attempt to remedy what it considers to be a significant issue by devising strategies, structuring programmes and proposing policy that may slow down

or reverse the emigration trend (Zhatkanbaeva *et al.* 2012). As the current study has suggested, such an approach should take into consideration the individual-level drivers and the subsequent internal conflicts experienced in relation to the individual-, familial-, community- and societal-level goals that impact on emigration decisions. While the decision processes and the presence of internal conflicts experienced by those considering emigration may be more universal, the specific drivers or reasons to stay or go may be more unique to individual societies. Thus, it is important to identify the specific individual drivers influencing such decisions, if the amelioration approaches undertaken at the societal level are to yield positive results at the individual level as well.

This study has focused on uncovering the main drivers considered by young, educated residents of North Macedonia that impact on their decision to remain in (i.e., community, culture and social responsibility) or move away from (the lack of professional opportunities, the institutional systems and cultural tightness) their homes. As such, this investigation has provided a deeper view into the complexity of some of the more prevalent challenges identified by young people in North Macedonia, as well as the opportunities available in the host country, when addressing the threat of the ‘emigration of young, skilled professionals’ (Grant 2019: 1). The findings of this investigation should be relevant to other small countries nested in the Balkan peninsula, Eastern and Central Europe and beyond, as the decision-making processes of young educated emigrants may follow similar patterns in other societies too.

As a final note, it is important to keep in mind that the patterns of migration are quite complex and that, while the participants in this study did not focus on the social networks in the receiving countries providing a potential pull away from their home country beyond what was presented in the above findings, a continued study of the transnational space in which decisions are being made on whether to leave or stay should inspire additional studies in North Macedonia and other countries in order to enrich our understanding of this phenomenon.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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