

Living Here, Owning There? Transnational Property Ownership and Migrants' (Im)Mobility Considerations Beyond Return

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Migrants' property ownership in their countries of origin is often understood through the prism of return: both intended and actual return mobilities. Applying a transnational optic, this article unpacks the relationships between migrants' property ownership 'back home' and their reflections on future moves and stays, not limited to possible return. We draw on 80 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2020 with Polish and Romanian migrants living in Barcelona and Oslo. They left their homeland, sometimes following domestic migration or international migration to other countries, before arriving in Spain and Norway. Based on these case studies of East–West migration within Europe, we contribute to work recognising the ongoing complex and diversified nature of mobilities in Europe. First, we detail what migrants' property ownership looks like in practice – forms of ownership, types of property, location. Second, we focus on how owning property in Poland or Romania intersects with migrants' considerations about moving or staying in the future, beyond return. Considerations about future (im)mobility shed light on transnational relationships, as these evolve over time and across space. Furthermore, we find that transnational property ownership in their countries of origin reveals much about migrants' relations with people and places 'back home' and reflects the known non-linearity of migration stories. Overall, however, transnational property ownership is a poor predictor of both return plans and intentions.

Keywords: return, (im)mobility, property, lifecourse, time, Poland, Romania

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Introduction

This article starts from a conundrum which emerged from the analysis of our interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants about their transnational property ownership ‘back home’. The extant literature often connects migrants’ property ownership in places of origin with assumptions about planned return. Its most clear-cut version might be described as a ‘return hypothesis’, deemed to explain property ownership in countries of origin based on a simple economic calculus of migrants investing in property there as preparation for return (Anghel, Fauser and Boccagni 2019). Increasingly, however, it is recognised that this might be *intended* rather than *actual* return (Dalakoglou 2010; Gherghina and Plopeanu 2020) and that questions of return intentions are actually intimately bound up with the ‘myth of return’ (Anwar 1979), transnational ties more generally (Carling and Erdal 2014; Carling and Pettersen 2014) and integration processes in settlement contexts (de Haas and Fokkema 2011). Alternatively, these properties might be seen as ‘second homes’ located in countries of origin and somewhat akin to the ‘second home’ ownership of many Northern Europeans in Southern Europe (Fauser 2020). The literature thus indicates that migrants’ property ownership in countries of origin and their possible future return are connected in multidirectional and complex ways.

Our conundrum emanates from the ways in which migrants’ reflections about property ownership in Poland or Romania uncovered issues other than return and, when related to future mobility, revealed complex transnationally oriented considerations, including the option of immobility (Schewel 2020). With this article we shed light on the relationships governing transnational property ownership and our respondents’ reflections about return and other forms of future mobility or immobility, demonstrating that property ownership and considerations of return or future (im)mobility are often loosely connected and that the former is far from being a predictor of the latter two. Our aim is to answer the question: *How does transnational property ownership intersect with migrants’ reflections on their future mobility and immobility?*

To answer this question, we investigate what migrants’ transnational property ownership looks like in practice: geographical location, type of property owned (house, apartment, agricultural land), whether these properties are fully owned by migrants or co-owned with other family members and if (and how) the properties are currently used (e.g. renting). Then we turn to the question of how property ownership might be connected to migrants’ considerations about future mobility or immobility, including possible return. The analysis of migrants’ ownership of property ‘back home’ opens a window onto both the practical and the emotional dimensions of lives which straddle transnational social fields. Through this we are able to add fine-grained detail to the existing scholarship, carving out the particular roles of property, as distinct from, though embedded within, the much-rehearsed themes of home and belonging (Pauli and Bedorf 2018).

The data on which this article draws were collected as part of the DIASPOLitic project,¹ for which 80 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Polish and Romanian migrants in Barcelona (Spain) and Oslo (Norway) – 20 participants per subgroup. We systematically collected information about property ownership in Poland and Romania, asked participants to tell us their migration stories, discuss their lives in Barcelona and Oslo and share their reflections on future mobility and immobility, including possible return. Their reflections on properties ‘back home’ were also revealed as part of these more-open questions, where the topic emerged organically. Ours is not a strictly comparative study but we draw actively on two cases of Central and Eastern European migration.

Beyond the conceptual focus on property ownership ‘back home’ and its intersections with migrants’ future (im)mobility considerations, the article points to possible implications for these emigration contexts. This relates to the impact that migrants’ properties, often left empty or incomplete in the countries of origin, have on property markets, housing policies and links to the increasing home ownership–inequality nexus in Central

and Eastern Europe. This is a dimension of questions about migrants' property ownership 'back home' which generally evades the attention of integration-focused migration studies with a settlement-context bias.

The article proceeds as follows: first we outline our theoretical points of departure, on home and belonging, transnational home-ownership and mobility/immobility. We then present the study's context and methods, including a brief overview of our sample, before the analysis, which consists of two sections (unpacking 'home ownership' and how this is connected to migrants' mobility/immobility considerations) and our conclusion.

Transnational property ownership: theoretical rooting

Though the material and emotional aspects of home are interconnected, the focus of this article is mostly on the material dimension – and we specifically analyse property ownership in countries of origin. By property we refer to housing – including the different types of property that migrants return to (e.g. farmhouses, cottages, flats, etc.).

Though we agree with Rytter (2019) that 'integration' is a term that needs challenging, here we understand integration as the ways in which the migrants themselves find their feet, to live their lives in their societies of settlement, whether helped by structural programmes or despite a lack or the inadequacies of such policies (Erdal 2013; Kivisto 2003). We recognise the relevance of interactions between transnational ties and processes of integration to the issues we discuss and that scholarship on migrants' home ownership in their societies of settlement, as part of research on migrant integration processes – including the barriers which migrants may face on housing markets (Firang 2019; Magnusson, Turner and Hedman 2014) – could well be further integrated with work on transnational property ownership. However, here we limit our contribution to the connections between migrants' home ownership transnationally and their reflections on their future mobility/immobility, including possible return.

Transnational property ownership

Our focus on migrants' home ownership is a transnational optic which is key to our article; this means that we adopt a transnational social fields approach (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Merla, Kilkey, Wilding and Baldassar 2021). Research has amply demonstrated that many migrants send remittances for purposes associated with housing construction, repairs, investment or the repayment of housing-related debt (Carling 2014; Smith and Mazzucato 2009). This is the case in empirical contexts around the world – from Ecuador to Pakistan, including in relation to Poland and Romania (Boccagni and Pérez Murcia 2020; Erdal 2014; Teodorescu 2018). Migrants' transnational home ownership has been an important topic over a long period, reflecting the fact that this is not a new phenomenon but one that spans what are often seen as different contexts globally (Boccagni 2016). Across these unique contexts, a pattern of similarity thus emerges – migrants invest financially in transnational housing projects (Boccagni and Erdal 2021).

Such transnational housing investments, sometimes referred to as 'remittances houses' (Anghel, Botezat, Coşciug, Manafi and Roman 2016; Lopez 2010), have been discussed in the literature on migrant transnationalism, with emphasis on how such property is important for issues of (continued) belonging to people, places and communities (Taylor 2015). Questions of belonging and the emotional dimensions of home ownership have also been linked with return intentions (Christie, Smith and Munro 2008). Meanwhile, return *intentions* are known to be a poor predictor of *actual* return and, instead, say more about questions of belonging, of a 'myth of return' (Anwar 1979) and of continued transnational ties, shedding light on investments which seem strange if their rationale is assumed to be *actual* return migration (Wagner 2014). Simultaneously, connections are found in survey-based research between migrants' propensity to send remittances and their return intentions,

reflecting stronger transnational attachments and generating greater expectations of return (Roman and Goschin 2012). Yet attachment can develop dynamically to span transnationally over multiple locations; attachment to the new place can also grow rapidly, thus becoming a decisive factor in migrants' considerations and decisions about returning, onward migrating or remaining (Trąbka 2019).

The existing scholarship can be strengthened through improving our understanding of the different forms which migrant transnational property-ownership investment takes. Property ownership forms and processes have different points of departure, relational dimensions, temporal frames and financial obligations, not least when understood transnationally, all of which we return to below.

Transnational property ownership can relate to different modes of acquisition; these include buying an existing property, inheriting a property or investing in the construction of a new property. Sometimes acquisition might take the form of adding an extension to a home – a floor or an annex. Ownership forms might also vary from single-person ownership, through to different forms of co-ownership, which might be more or less formalised – e.g. between children and parents, siblings or spouses/partners. With complex co-ownership structures, often changing over time in relation to negotiations over inheritance, conflicts can occur, as has been analysed in the British-Bangladeshi context (Miah 2021).

Boccagni and Erdal (2021) highlight how transnational investments might be made in different locations – from the ancestral village to a nearby town, a large city in the region or any other location. Furthermore, the purpose (planned use) of the property varies, including its use as a family home, a place to (possibly) return to, a place for relatives to stay, a holiday home or to rent out. There might also be different motivations for such investments, such as better-quality housing, social status, symbolic attachment, presence in absence, a cultural transfer to children or as a financial investment (2021: 1070).

When conceptualising property ownership from a transnational perspective, it is evident that it reflects transnational family ties as well as families' migratory patterns (Burrell 2017; Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Kilkey, Merla and Baldassar 2018; Merla *et al.* 2021). Thus, questions of ownership often involve people in multiple locations, set within transnational interpersonal relationships. Often, transnational home ownership is intertwined not only with financial issues but also with obligations and with care responsibility for elderly relatives, such that practical or financial and more emotional considerations interact in complex ways over time. This also underscores how property can mean many different things to different people – and how the transnational perspective helps to shed light on some of these meanings of property, depending on where one is located.

Mobility, immobility and return

While migration is a clear instance of human mobility, over time the degree to which migrants are mobile or not in their lives varies enormously. Economic considerations mean that most migrants, in fact, are not hyper-mobile but, rather, relatively sedentary in their day-to-day lives, even if life is pierced by international moves at several different junctures (Erdal 2021). This understanding of migrants as not necessarily always internationally mobile is relevant to our discussion of transnational housing ownership – where migrants, just like populations without migratory backgrounds, will span a continuum from highly mobile to highly immobile at different points in time (Wyss and Dahinden 2022). We understand mobility and immobility to include different degrees of choice and constraint (Schewel 2020).

Increasingly return migration is discussed both in ways that include a return movement from place A to place B – in a linear, permanent sense – and in ways that encompass the fluidity of return mobilities as temporary or open-ended or where return visits replace more-permanent forms of return migration over time (King and Christou 2011). Indeed, return migration can only be understood through the consideration of

a complex web of reasons. The existing scholarship usually explains migrants' return in relation to their (non-)integration in the destination country or by considering their ties with the origin country. While the first stream of literature links the return decision to unsuccessful integration in the settlement society, the second stream highlights three possible dimensions to migrants' reasons for return: belonging (e.g. identity, attachment, pride), connections (e.g. nostalgia, relationships, relatives) or presence (e.g. short visits, sending remittances, property ownership) (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016; Vlase 2013; Vlase and Voicu 2018).

The literature suggests that property ownership is a key factor that migrants take into account when planning and carrying out returns (Massey, Alarcon, Durand and González 1990). For instance, research on the Ghanaian context (Kuuire, Arku, Luginaah, Buzzelli and Abada 2016; Owusu 1998) suggests that building and/or extending houses is one of the most important practices which returnees use to signal their intention to return 'home'. Similar findings were reached by Labrianidis and Kazazi (2006), who demonstrate that returnees also send financial remittances for building or renovating houses prior to actual return. However, the relationship between return and property ownership is not as direct as one would assume (Anniste and Tammaru 2014). For instance, migrants can also prolong their stays abroad in order to sustain the construction projects which they have back home, as Peil (1995) suggests.

There are several reasons why property ownership 'back home' is often seen in the existing scholarship as one of the most important factors which migrants take into consideration when contemplating return. One reason is the fact that having a place to return to can play an important role in easing reintegration in home societies (Labrianidis and Kazazi 2006; Vlase and Voicu 2018). Another reason is that houses back home can be used as places to stay for regular visits, hence allowing migrants to maintain ties with the country of origin (Wessendorf 2007). Yet another important reason, in addition to practical purposes (e.g. financial investment, holidays), is related to the way in which migrants maintain a 'symbolic' presence in their absence through transnational property ownership (Erdal 2012).

However, looking at return mobilities through a transnational optic necessarily complicates the return hypothesis. Contrasting earlier literature, where return migration was considered the final stage of the migration cycle, the current literature increasingly shows that migrants actively maintain ties that connect the origin and destination countries, while constantly reconsidering their future trajectories and the possibility to re-enter a migratory pathway (Anghel *et al.* 2019). For instance, as Kilkey and Ryan (2021) argue, *unsettling* events – or life-changing events for a migrant – may impact on their present experiences of migration and thus also on their plans for the future. This fluidity or open-endedness becomes even more visible in the context of the EU (and EEA), where the degree of free mobility which citizens enjoy is higher than that enjoyed by non-EU citizens and outside the EU (Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2018).

Methods and data

This article draws on an analysis of 80 semi-structured interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants in Barcelona (Spain) and Oslo (Norway), with 20 interviewees in each subgroup. We conducted the interviews between January and April 2020, mostly in person, with the remainder online (due to the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic). The research project actively adhered to the research ethics guidelines as set out by the Norwegian National Committee for Research ethics in the social sciences and the humanities, including voluntary and informed consent to participation, due consideration of data management and security, as well as active limitations on the collection and storage of personal data. All names used in the article are pseudonyms and not the interviewees' real names, in order to help maintain their anonymity.

Interviews with Polish migrants were conducted in Polish and those with migrants from Romania in Romanian. Both the in-person and the online interviews were recorded, transcribed in full and translated into

English. By following the same interview guide that we collaboratively developed as a team before the data collection, we ensured that, overall, the quality of the online interviews did not substantially differ from that of the earlier in-person interviews. As these were the remaining few interviews carried out with each of the groups we worked with, the interviewers had already gained expertise and familiarity with the interview guide. It should also be noted that the guide was a semi-structured one, several themes of which were always covered. There was also an exercise designed to prompt interviewees, which may have been easier to use in online interviews. The interviews were all coded following the same codebook and based on thematic codes in NVivo software for qualitative data analysis.

Polish and Romanian migrant communities were chosen for our study due to their size and the scale of emigration from both countries. We opted for interviews with both groups in Barcelona (Spain) and Oslo (Norway), since Romanians are the largest EU migrant group in Spain, whereas Poles are the largest in Norway. At the time of our case-selection (2019), Romanians were the fifth largest EU migrant group in Norway and Poles the fifth-largest in Spain, thus in both cases relatively smaller, yet still significant. This article draws upon material gathered for the project looking at external voting participation among Central and Eastern European migrant populations in Western Europe.

Sample characteristics

The interviewees have diverse backgrounds, including their place of origin – which varies from Warsaw and Bucharest to rural districts – educational level, age, gender and migration experiences. Our sample is evenly divided between men and women in each of the four subgroups. The interviewees were predominately born in the 1980s, with a smaller group born in the 1970s: 10 interviewees were born in the 1990s and 6 in the 1960s or earlier. The majority of the interviewees hold only one citizenship: that of their country of origin. Only 4 interviewees hold dual citizenship of their country of origin and Spain or Norway.

The majority of the participants migrated to Spain and Norway after Poland's (2004) and Romania's (2007) accession to the European Union. Only 15 interviewees arrived in Spain or Norway prior to their country's EU access. In terms of transnational financial support, 74 of the 80 interviewees do not receive any form of regular support from Poland or Romania; however, 31 regularly send financial support back to people there. Among our interviewees, 32 own property in their country of origin; those who do mostly reside in Oslo (20). In a few instances, ownership is shared with other family members, while several other interviewees mention prospective ownership (e.g. future inheritances), which highlights the complexity of transnational co-ownership arrangements. In relation to their future plans for return, 18 of the 32 interviewees who own property in Romania or Poland have no intention of returning, while 7 have concrete plans to do so. The remaining 7 interviewees will consider the possibility of a return in the future but have no clear plans as yet. Regarding the place of origin, the majority of Romanian participants emigrated from smaller towns and rural districts while, for our Polish interviewees, the sample is more evenly balanced between those who come from urban and those from rural areas.

Transnational property ownership and future mobility considerations

We now present our data and analysis. First, we provide a brief contextualisation of the development of the housing market in Romania and Poland in the past three decades. Then we focus on the material aspects of property ownership, including the type of property owned, its current use, whether or not it is currently co-owned with other family members and its location. Subsequently, we turn to how participants reflect on the idea of return to Poland and Romania and future (im)mobility considerations and whether or not these are connected

to the ownership of properties ‘back home’. Together, these two analysis sections allow us to address our research question: How does owning property ‘back home’ intersect with migrants’ reflections on future (im)mobilities?

The contextual backdrop: Recent property developments in Poland and Romania

To better understand how property ownership in Poland and Romania may interact with questions of return, it is useful to provide a contextualisation of the recent development in the property markets in the two countries. In the last 30 years, two processes have influenced home-ownership dynamics: on the one hand, the privatisation of the housing market (which was controlled by the state prior to 1989), followed by its subsequent financialisation (Sikorska-Lewandowska 2021) and, on the other, the unequal development between large and secondary cities (Cristea, Mare, Moldovan, China, Farole, Vințan, Park, Garrett and Ionescu-Heroiu 2017), with the consequent internal migration from rural areas and smaller localities to bigger cities, coupled with external migration to European countries, both before and after the 2004–2007 EU expansion.

In the main cities, considered poles of economic development, homeownership has become a potential investment, too, while, in rural regions, small cities and post-industrial regions, a process of depopulation and emptying has taken place (Pusca 2010), with the consequent devaluation of properties (Sikorska-Lewandowska 2021). This leads to important inequalities, as many families do not have a mortgage capacity and are not able to buy a flat on the open market, while social housing is lacking and often in poor condition. Consequently, apartment ownership is highly valued in the Polish and Romanian moral economy (Fassin 2009). Although levels of ownership are relatively high (84.2 per cent in Poland and 94.7 per cent in Romania), there is shortage of apartments in the major cities, as they are considered a safe asset: in fact, the minority share of the population who have the means to do so, have been treating investing in property as a private form of hedging against uncertain future pensions (Pawłowski 2021).

Unpacking property ownership ‘back home’

Among our 80 interviewees, 32 owned property in Poland or Romania at the time of the interview; others have owned in the past or might in the future, thus allowing reflections from different vantage points. Of those who do own property, most own a flat or a house, with flats mostly found in cities and houses mostly in rural areas.

Some of the participants own two properties, usually a flat and a house in, respectively, an urban and a rural context. A few respondents also own a plot of land in the countryside or on the outskirts of smaller towns, where a prospective house may be built. We find that property ownership sometimes reflects migrants’ family past as well as current internal migration patterns within Poland and Romania: this is often reflected in the variegated patterns of shared or co-ownership (e.g. between siblings) or across generations, such as when those of the younger generation move to cities. Most of the property-owning migrants we interviewed own it independently. However, a handful of participants refer either to properties they will inherit in the future or to properties that are co-owned. Others refer to less-clear structures, where property ownership is described as co-managed by family members who have not migrated, such as parents or siblings, whereas the formal ownership (whose name is on deeds) is perhaps just one person. In our data we could not identify overt conflicts over property ownership although the outlines of potential, latent conflicts are sometimes present in these transnational family relationships and co-ownership structures.

A crucial aspect of property ownership is how the property is being used. We found that most of the properties owned by our interviewees are, in fact, left empty. This is more predominant among property-owning Romanian interviewees, whereas among the Polish respondents the picture is more mixed. Wojciech (aged 48;

all names are pseudonyms), originally from rural Masovia and now resident in Oslo, exemplifies a common situation among our participants:

The house is empty in Poland because my daughters obviously never want to live there. The older daughter lives in Warsaw. So, they don't even want to look in that direction. But we let the house be there, because I need this comfort. I don't go to Poland often, once every two years, but when we go, I take my key, open my door and go to sleep in my bed. And I don't have to stay at a hotel or ask for help from my parents or in-laws – 'Can we stay overnight' or something? I have this psychological comfort, I have my place in the world.

Wojciech's house in Poland is left empty not only because of his own migration to Norway but also because of his daughters' relocation from rural Masovia to Warsaw. However, instead of renting the vacated building out, Wojciech prefers to keep it readily available for when he (seldom) travels back to Poland for family visits and holidays, avoiding the need to book a hotel or organise staying with family. The idea of property as 'psychological comfort', as Wojciech puts it, is a common thread in our dataset. In the literature, such reasoning for having a place to stay in the country of origin is common (see e.g. Dalakoglou 2010; Erdal 2012; Freeman 2013); however, little attention has been paid to *why* these properties are left empty – if indeed they are empty most of the time – and which considerations underlie this reality.

Monica (48), originally from Galaţi and now living in Barcelona, articulates her reasons – like Wojciech – for keeping her property in Bucharest empty:

I don't want to sell my flat in Bucharest, because it seems to me... I feel like it's my home base, it's the house that I have earned, it wasn't a gift from my parents, I paid for it, from my job in Bucharest, and I am very attached to it. It seems that, if I sell it, I'd sort of lose my footing somehow... It's my base, it's a base.

Therefore, not only is Monica emotionally attached to her flat but this attachment also constitutes 'a base' for when she travels back to Romania – therefore she keeps it empty. However, Monica's perspective adds nuance, in that the flat represents not only a form of comfort and practicality but also a symbol of her successful career progression prior to migrating to Spain. For Monica, her 'base' in Bucharest represents ontological security, as a migrant and as a person, transcending questions of belonging; however, it is interesting that she is among our interviewees who do not have any intentions of returning to live either in their property or in Romania at all.

Properties can thus represent both spaces which migrants can go to when they travel back 'home' for family visits or holidays and spaces of strong emotional attachment. Meanwhile, we find that both of these elements appear to work against the idea of migrants (or their families) renting the properties out. Simultaneously, it emerges from our data that some of the properties that migrants own have been left undeveloped for a long time or are too old and in need of renovation, thus remaining unfit for either renting out or indeed for the owners to move back to in the immediate future.

As the earlier literature has shown, we also find that the construction, extension or renovation of existing properties or the purchase of new properties may become a form of status symbol, a signifier of 'successful migration' to the rest of the community 'at home' (Boccagni and Erdal 2021; Page and Sunjo 2018). Newer properties, conversely, might represent forms of financial investment and modes of securing savings earned from migration – in the form of transnational investments – the latter being particularly true for Polish and Romanian migrants resident in Oslo. This is an aspect of migrants' transnational property ownership which is, thus far, under-researched – not least in the context of intra-EU mobilities.

Location is an important determinant of how the property is managed and of how migrants relate to it transnationally. One of the key reasons for not renting properties out that emerged from our data is that these properties are located in regions of Poland and Romania that have witnessed considerable depopulation and in which the demand for renting is low or non-existent. This is not to say that the reasons for owning and modes of using properties discussed above do not apply in such contexts, e.g. as a holiday home or a ‘safe space’ in more existential terms. However, the question of why properties remain empty in regions characterised by ongoing depopulation is very different, compared to those in towns and especially larger cities.

The significance of location and type of property ownership is underscored in our data. This is the case especially for rural areas affected by depopulation, where migrants’ property – whether family-owned, inherited or constructed – cannot in practice be rented out due to the non-existent demand. In contrast, property investments in cities can serve similar emotional purposes and as holiday homes, while simultaneously having the potential to be seen as financial investments, whether as savings or, in the shorter term, also as sources of income through renting out.

Yet, even among those who owned flats in cities, we found only a few instances of these being rented out and thus becoming a secondary source of income to top up salaries received in the country of settlement, especially among participants based in Barcelona. Not renting out was again often linked to migrants’ desire to keep properties available for their own use, perhaps signalling the combined hassle of dealing with tenants and the flats not being free: the idea of renting out was not worth the potential income gained from it. Finally, property as investments also opens up the possibility of selling them, which can facilitate the onward movement of migrants who wish or plan to re-migrate to further destinations, thus adding a mobility dimension beyond return, as we expand on in the next section.

Property and future (im)mobility considerations

In this second analysis section we specifically address the connections between property ownership in countries of origin and migrants’ (im)mobility considerations. As anticipated from what we know based on the literature (Gherghina and Plopeanu 2020; Roman and Goschin 2012), property ownership and return migration are linked in a multifaceted, non-causal and non-linear way, as this article fleshes out in relation to the Polish and Romanian contexts, while extending the gaze beyond return.

Of the 80 migrants we interviewed, only 10 had made concrete plans to return to Poland or Romania in the immediate future (these were mostly migrants living in Oslo). A few more expressed the possibility or wish to move back in the medium or longer term – so perhaps within the next 10 years or so – upon reaching a satisfactory personal economic status or upon retirement. Importantly, not all the migrants we spoke with – who had made concrete plans or who wished to return later – owned a property in Poland or Romania. In fact, some prospective future returnees were hoping or planning to buy property only after their return to their country of origin. Meanwhile, some of the migrants we interviewed had both past migration experiences in contexts other than Barcelona and Oslo and considered future mobility beyond staying or returning – including the possibility of onward migration instead.

To highlight the complex ways in which property ownership and considerations of future mobility are connected, here is a snapshot of our sample, which is intended to serve as an illustration and an invitation to reflect on the potentially complex and multi-directional links between transnational property ownership and future mobility and immobility considerations:

- 10 interviewees have concrete plans to return to Poland or Romania: 7 own property there, 3 do not.
- 8 interviewees would consider moving back at a later stage in life: 7 of them own property there, 1 does not.
- 62 interviewees do not want or plan to move back: 18 own property there, 44 do not.

How is property ownership connected to future (im)mobility considerations then? First, in our analysis, we note a distinction which pertains to issues of time: age (at the time of interview, and of migration), length of stay abroad, historical time in relation to experiences of post-communist transition in Poland and Romania, EU membership and the approach to intra-EU mobility. Overall, we find that the younger interviewees show more interest in their professional careers, economic position and mobility – which are perceived positively – including re-migration to another EU country. In the case of older interviewees, mobility was generally conceived more linearly, from the origin country to a destination country.

Second, considerations about a possible decision to return ‘home’ (or not) are shaped by a series of factors that emerge as salient alongside the matter of property ownership in Poland and Romania; in most cases they are seen as far more central than (possible) property ownership. Recurring themes in our dataset include the availability and quality of job opportunities, access to and provision of welfare and healthcare, education (higher education or public schooling for migrants’ children) and romantic connections in the case of migrants whose partners’ or spouses’ origins diverge from their own.

Andrei (34), originally from Bucharest and living in Barcelona, points precisely to the mix of family duties, job opportunities, overall quality of life and a not-ideal co-ownership of property ‘back home’ as factors leading him to decide to invest in a property in Spain and settling there long-term. He says:

I feel very good here. I see a future here. I want to buy a house soon. Basically, everything I wanted to do in Romania, I will do it here little by little. I haven't been in Romania in four years. Of course, it is our country and we will go back one day. I will go back to Romania, not right now because I have plans here, I have my family here, and I cannot leave my job to go back to Romania just because we have an apartment there that we all share (Mum, Dad, me and my brother) and a house in the village, that is it, nothing else.

Andrei thus co-owns two properties back in Romania yet, in his considerations about future (im)mobilities, he wants to settle in Barcelona in the short to mid term and also hopes to return to Romania in the longer term; however, his intention to return at some point to Romania is not related to the properties he co-owns. Rather than suggesting a facilitating role, these properties are referred to as facts connected with his non-migrant family relations, playing a limited role if any in his considerations of return.

Quality of life and, for some migrants, the social and political contexts in Poland and Romania compared to Norway and Spain, are aspects to be considered when reflecting on return or onward mobilities. Kasia (35) is the interviewee who has by far the most detailed plan for returning to Poland. Originally from Gliwice and now resident in Oslo, she has bought a flat in the city she migrated from, using savings from her job in Oslo, and her return is imminent, though with a caveat:

I have already found a flat, I'm from Gliwice, so southern Poland, and I have a flat there already and now I'm just waiting to see what will happen with this pandemic. (...) And what's happening in Poland really alarms me in the sense that I've always been engaged on the left side of politics... I've taken part in elections, for example, but also as an activist. I'm left-wing, women's rights, human rights, etc. So, the government of Poland is totally not my fairy tale.

Her worries about the political and economic management of the Covid-19 pandemic in Poland and what she sees as an increasingly hostile political environment there, are complicating her plans to return, reflecting the non-linearity and complexity of migrants’ decision-making considerations about return.

In opposition to Kasia, we have the example of Andrea (42). Originally from Transylvania, she has been living in Barcelona for 20 years, and is married with two children. She openly states that she has no intention

whatsoever of moving back to Romania: having a brother in Romania is not enough of a reason to move back. In fact, she has bought a flat in Barcelona and she articulates her wish to remain in Spain on the grounds of her children's present and future welfare and happiness, something she argues would not be possible to guarantee in Romania.

Furthermore, we also find that migrants – especially those from Poland living in Oslo – underscore the relative geographical proximity as a factor enabling 'transnational living', which means that a permanent relocation is rendered unnecessary (see also Carling, Erdal and Talleraas 2021). For migrants from both Poland and Romania who live in Barcelona, the city's pleasant climate, particularly in winter, is a factor central to considerations about return or onward mobility (especially at an older age or upon retirement), making leaving Barcelona less attractive.

However, for some migrants in Barcelona and Oslo, owning property in their cities of settlement is linked to their reflections on their future (im)mobilities and, more specifically, to a decision about where life is to be lived. As Kacper (39) states, life is to be lived here, in Barcelona, rather than there, in Wrocław, Poland:

I consciously sold the apartment I had in Poland and have one here now. That was a conscious moment of a conscious conversation with my parents, that I don't want to have anything in Poland also in terms of inheritance. My life is here. So, we have talked that through.

Kacper is an example of a migrant who does not consider return at all and who has also renounced any future property inheritance. This is a different example of how (im)mobility and property ownership can be connected in migrants' considerations about future (im)mobility – in Kacper's case, centring on staying in Barcelona. Like Kacper, Magdalena (37), who moved to Barcelona from Poland in 2017, has opted to give up on the family house she was supposed to inherit, by selling it and sharing the dividends with her mother: with her share of the money she bought a property in Barcelona. This move constituted a considerable downsizing, as the house she sold in Łódź was big and had a garden while, in Barcelona, she could only afford a small flat. However, she has no intention of moving back to Poland and made this clear to her family, who helped her to settle in Spain.

Given that 32 of our interviewees owned property in Poland or Romania and others had owned or might own property in the future, we had a rich set of data through which to explore connections between property ownership 'back home' and migrants considerations about future (im)mobilities – as set within their migration stories. We expected to find non-linear connections between transnational property ownership and future (im)mobility considerations: our expectations were confirmed, as property ownership 'back home' does not emerge as a predictor of return migration. We also recognise that, for many migrants, this is not a zero-sum game and ownership 'here' and 'there' transnationally can be understood quite differently, either linked to return plans or intentions or not linked at all. We have indeed presented findings which help to expand the multitude of ways in which these connections are made at both practical and emotional levels, with financial dimensions, as well as transnational family obligations, that need negotiation in the contexts of Polish and Romanian migration. Though we have opted to not systematically analyse property ownership in settlement contexts, we also see that migration leads to changes in how the meaning of property 'back home' is understood from a distance, as well as over time and at different life-cycle stages.

Conclusion

Drawing on our analysis, first, of what property 'back home' entails and, second, of connections between transnational property ownership and considerations about future (im)mobilities, three issues merit further

discussion. Our analysis supports previous studies in underscoring the salience of transnational ties for many, but not all, migrants. For some migrants, transnational membership and belonging ‘back home’ matter and is materially represented through property ownership, whether in the village of origin or in the city in which they lived prior to emigration. However, the transnational dimension is often the clearest when it comes to forms of co-ownership, questions of inheritance or having a place to stay when visiting. These are practical issues set within transnational family relationships, where care for elderly parents is often intertwined with responsibility for family property.

Of course, life in the country of settlement shapes migrants’ considerations about future (im)mobilities significantly, albeit dependent on length of stay, types of education and work and, overall, integration in the sense of how migrants themselves adapt to and develop strategies to live their lives in societies of settlement. Questions of future (im)mobilities – thus of ‘Should I stay or should I go?’ – concern, on the one hand, ontological security and a sense of belonging and, on the other – more practically – how individuals manage risk and thus approach the task of securing resources to maintain a life in their place of choice or, in a few cases, enabling a transnational life, straddling societies both ‘here’ and ‘there’.

Our investigation of property ownership ‘back home’ and its connection with considerations about future (im)mobilities fleshes out the many ways in which ‘property’ matters beyond migrants’ return (intentions), highlighting the ambiguous connections between movement, belonging and property ownership. This relates to how return, intended or actual, is in reality more about ongoing transnational exchanges and interactions with relatives ‘back home’. Thus, property back home is important for understanding relations with people and places in countries of origin, as set within transnational relationships, whatever future (im)mobility considerations might be.

At the same time, considering property in conjunction with future (im)mobility, we find that migrants may actively opt out of owning property in places of origin, as a way of ‘cutting ties’. Yet, not owning property ‘back home’ might just as easily be tied to other possible explanations, such as not having the resources, prioritising differently or planning to invest in the future, perhaps even in conjunction with an intended return migration. Thus, our analysis suggests that the basic information about whether or not migrants own property back home ought to be approached with analytical care, in terms of what this might suggest, both for return (intentions) and questions of belonging.

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Conflict of interest statement


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