



A DECISION FOR LIFE

TEXT: SABINE FISCHER

For decades now, migration has been massively changing the structure of society in Europe. But how does it actually feel to grow older in a new country? And does the risk that comes with migration ultimately pay off for those who take it? Stefan Gruber and Gregor Sand at the Max Planck Institute for Social Law and Social Policy set out to find answers to these questions.

For Barbara and Andrzej Klimczyk, Germany is a story that began at a highway exit. It was 1986, and the couple had originally planned to return to their native Poland after spending two years in Algeria. However, on this return journey, they had a change of heart – a decision that altered the course of their entire lives.

“We had many good years in Poland,” recalls Barbara Klimczyk, now in her seventies, leafing through a dark green photo album. She sits with her husband Andrzej in their living room in Gerlingen, Baden-Württemberg, in an upholstered armchair that she brought to Germany many years ago from her parents’ home in Gliwice, Upper Silesia. The album on her lap contains many memories of her time in her homeland. Photos of her standing confidently at the wedding altar in a short dress. A close-up of laughing girlfriends at a large festive table. Pictures Andrzej once took of their little daughter playing. Back in Poland, he was an architect and cartoonist, while she worked at the university and studied Russian literature. Her circle of friends consisted of beautiful minds and people with a feeling for art – a life characterized by intellectual exchange.

But when martial law was declared in Poland in 1981, the couple’s everyday life changed abruptly. The economy was in stasis; at one point it was no longer possible to buy coffee at the supermarket. Andrzej’s critical drawings were edited before each publication in such a way that their original message was completely lost. “In addition, the air in Gliwice’s industrial fog was full of heavy metals and fumes. We didn’t want our daughter to grow up in that environment,” says Andrzej Klimczyk, adding: “We lived on a war footing from one day to the next. Yet we’re people who need freedom.” In the wake of this, it was not a difficult decision for them to get off the highway in Germany after a period spent working in Algeria. They hoped to live in freedom within a democratic system.

Hope for better living conditions

Many people who decide to leave their home country have similar considerations to those of Barbara and Andrzej Klimczyk. “One of the main motivations behind migration is the hope of improving one’s own well-being and living conditions,” explains Stefan Gruber of the Max Planck Institute for Social Law and Social Policy. Together with his colleague Gregor Sand, he conducted two studies on how those who opt to leave their homeland are affected by this decision over the course of a lifetime. The two researchers specifically selected the question of whether migrants

over the age of 50 feel comfortable in the land they now call home.

Domagoj Vlastic also yearned for a new future when he first came to Germany in the mid-1990s. In his case, it was the Balkans war that severely shook his life: the native Croat was forcibly conscripted as a soldier for four years. An experience that not only turned his life plans upside down, but also left its mark. After his military deployment, Vlastic began suffering from insomnia, having post-traumatic experiences, and longing for a better life. Before the war upset his plans, Domagoj Vlastic looked set for a career as a professional soccer player in his hometown in what is now Croatia. It was precisely this prospect that opened the way to a new life for him: “I was lucky enough to get the chance to join a soccer club abroad,” he recalls.

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ANDRZEJ KLIMCZYK

Via many twists and turns, the then 23-year-old finally landed a contract with a soccer club in Radolfzell on Lake Constance, bringing him into contact for the first time with a culture that had previously been completely foreign to him. “I didn’t speak a word of German, which made things really difficult at first,” he says. Today, his pronunciation is characterized by a mixture of a sharp Eastern European accent and soft, rounded Swabian. Back then, he had no idea that he would be spending his life in Germany from that point on. For him, the move abroad initially meant the prospect of a better life. For decades now, migration has been changing social structures in Europe. According to an evaluation by Germany’s Federal Agency for Civic Education, more than one in four people in Germany in 2020 has a migrant background – a figure that points to the extent of migration movements in and to Europe. Many migrants live in their new home country for many years, gain experience there, and often play a decisive role in shaping society. But how does it feel to grow older in a country in which you were not born? Do people really feel settled in their new home? How do they feel about their earlier decision to emigrate? And did it really pay off for them?

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PHOTO: VERENA MÜLLER FOR MPG

Settled: Barbara and Andrzej Klimczyk immigrated to Germany in 1986. Their interest in art and literature has helped them build a circle of friends here.



PHOTO: PRIVATE

New to the club: In the mid-1990s, Domagoj Vlastic came to FC Radolfzell on Lake Constance as a soccer player from Croatia. The newspaper picture is a souvenir from back then.

Domagoj Vlastic, on the other hand, noticed a feeling of being at home in Germany almost in passing. For a time, he lived near the Swiss border and made frequent trips to the neighboring country. It was there that he experienced a realization: “I thought to myself every time, no, these are just not my people. It’s nice here, but I also want to go back home – and by that I meant Germany,” Vlastic says. According to the findings of Stefan Gruber and Gregor Sand, this feeling of being settled is contingent on many factors. The research duo uses results from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). In their subsample, 105,000 people from 11 European countries were surveyed on various topics. About eight percent of them are considered migrants – that is, at the time of the SHARE interviews, they were living in a country in which they were not born. “The dataset is not limited exclusively to people who have migrated, but the subsample size is large enough to allow us to draw meaningful conclusions from it,” Gruber explains. Especially exciting is the fact that those with a migrant background in the SHARE dataset emigrated a long time ago. On average, they have lived in their new home for 40 years – optimal for Gruber’s and Sand’s research objectives: “We can measure whether their circumstances have improved – across economic and non-economic factors,” Sand says.

40 The answers that the researchers found to these questions in the course of their two studies are impressive: comparing the well-being of people who have migrated from one European country to another with the well-being of those who have remained in their countries of origin reveals positive effects of migration: “Migrated individuals – we restricted ourselves to intra-European migration – display significantly higher well-being than people who have not migrated. Here, the decision to migrate seems to have paid off in most cases,” Gruber says.

“We now feel that we made the right decision in coming to Germany,” says Andrzej Klimczyk, confirming this. And this was despite the fact that the young family, which was recognized as ethnic German repatriates by the German state in 1986, did not get off to an entirely easy start. Barbara Klimczyk, who belonged to the German minority in Upper Silesia, has spoken German as well as Polish since her childhood. Still, it took the couple a while to settle into their new home. After working in the border transit camp Friedland and in Aachen, Andrzej finally found a job as an architect in Stuttgart, while Barbara taught German to other immigrants. They also began to embrace their love of art and culture again here: “We love going to art exhibitions and readings, especially at the excellent Stuttgart Literaturhaus. It was through these things that we gradually began to network with people. That made it much easier for us to get settled,” says Barbara Klimczyk.

To do this, the researchers took a close look at the CASP index in the dataset – a scale that measures people’s quality of life based on the factors of control, autonomy, self-realization, and pleasure. “Twelve items are surveyed to produce this index. For example, whether people are looking forward to the next day or whether they feel they have control over their lives and can do the things they feel like doing,” explains Stefan Gruber.

For people to be happy throughout their old age in their new homeland, individual and social aspects are just as decisive as the financial situation, he says: “The level of income that people manage to attain in the destination country is important,” says Gregor Sand. This is precisely where a crucial limitation lies with regard to the

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STEFAN GRUBER

SUMMARY

Those who emigrate within Europe benefit compared to those who remain in their home countries: on average, migrants are financially better off and more satisfied than their native counterparts.

However, compared to the native population of the country to which they have migrated, immigrants often have less money and feel less well-off.

Policies can help to boost migrants' satisfaction by improving their access to the employment market and citizenship and by facilitating family reunification. Society as a whole also benefits from this.

positive effects of migration: in spite of the fact that migrants are usually significantly more satisfied than people in their country of origin, the comparison with natives in their country of destination is often negative. On average, those who have emigrated here have measurably lower well-being than those who grew up in the country. "This is where the financial situation plays a significant role," Gruber says. "But other factors – such as whether individuals have citizenship in the country – also influence how happy they currently are."

If you take a closer look, the results also reveal some subtleties. The researchers identified significant differences, particularly regarding the origin and age of the respondents: "For example, if someone from northern or central Europe emigrates to Sweden, their well-being does not differ significantly from that of the locals," Sand says. The difference between natives and immigrants is particularly evident among people from southern or eastern European countries. And it depends significantly on the age of the respondents. In short, the older they get, the smaller the difference becomes. However, according to Gruber and Sand, this is not because migrants become happier in old age, but rather because other factors become more decisive than migration. "Well-being decreases with age for all respondents, proportionally more for natives than for migrants, meaning that the falling curves of both groups slowly converge," says Gregor Sand.

The level of satisfaction immigrants can reach in a society depends mostly, and decisively, on the integration policy of the new host country. How significant are the obstacles? How straightforward is access to the employment

market and healthcare? To education, culture, citizenship? "To understand this influence, we also looked at the integration policies of different countries," Gruber says. The result of this observation is clear: countries that pursue an open integration policy actively contribute to closing the gap in satisfaction between immigrants and natives through this course of action.

"For us, there are three big lessons to be learned for better integration," concludes Stefan Gruber. To ensure greater well-being, he says, it is important for countries to create equal access opportunities for migrants and natives in the employment market. They should also make access to citizenship as easy as possible and provide opportunities for migrants' families to join them without having to jump through bureaucratic hoops. According to the two researchers, these recommendations to policymakers have meaningful societal implications. After all, the more comfortable people feel in a country, the better integrated they are – and the more invested they become, the more they contribute to society and help shape it. According to Gruber and Sand, the consequences of this include a reduction of the burden on social systems and living together in more diversity.

Confidently European, cosmopolitan, and invested

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The ability to play an optimal role in society is also important to Barbara and Andrzej Klimczyk. Both see themselves as European, cosmopolitan, and invested. "We can get to know people and things that we wouldn't have been able to otherwise," says Andrzej Klimczyk. Today, they are involved in the German-Polish community and have also built up a circle of friends in Gerlingen with diverse interests. Apart from a few close relationships from their youth, this circle consists largely of people in their immediate vicinity.

Domagoj Vlasic has also built up a large circle of friends and his own family in Germany. When he compares his life with those of his acquaintances, he looks in both directions: how is he doing in comparison to his German neighbors? And where does he stand compared to his acquaintances in Croatia? In both cases, he is satisfied with what he has achieved. "I'm happy here. But I'm starting to wish for a little less hustle and bustle in my life – the opportunity to grow vegetables with my own hands, to relax," he says. He would now like to spend his retirement together with his wife in Croatia, near his parents' former farm. However, this does not mean he will be saying farewell to Germany for good. "The country has become my home. When it gets boring in Croatia in the winter, I'll probably go back to the Christmas market in Germany, although it's likely I'll return sooner than that."

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