

Transforming the European Migrant Crisis into Rural Developmental Opportunities: The Case of Latvia

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The European migrant crisis has been accentuated as the most momentous challenge that the European Union has faced since its establishment in 1993. The magnitude of this migration crisis is been amplified by political instability in the Middle East, wars, limited economic opportunities, and climate change. Migration analysts have viewed this “polycrisis” from an optimistic and pessimist perspective. The paper however pursues that of optimism and explores how the integration of skilled political migrants can be integrated into shrinking Latvian communities with an agendum to transforming the economically stagnated rural communities into viable rural spaces. The researcher interviewed 91 immigrants from nine countries to gain an insight into perception of political migrants amongst other variables. Furthermore, inductive and deductive approaches were used in synthesizing pertinent information from official records and reports on the above subject matter. A core emphasis of the paper was that the shrinking population of Latvia will adversely impede its future economic development. Hence, the paper advocates a systematic integration of skilled political migrants into the Latvian rural economy as an agendum to accelerating rural development.

Keywords: European migrant crisis, rural development, Latvia, shrinking population, political migrants

Introduction

The European migrant crisis has persuasively been accentuated as the most momentous challenge that the European Union has witnessed since its establishment in 1993 (Poddar, 2016). The magnitude of this migration crisis is been amplified by political instability in the Middle East, wars, limited economic opportunities, and climate change (Wolf & Ossewaarde, 2018; Upadhyay, 2016). In accordance to the estimate put forth by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 59.5 million migrants are currently displaced. Amongst these migrants, 19.5 million are refugees. A majoritant (1,011,700) of these migrants arrived the shores of Europe by sea, while a few others (34,900) arrived by land according a 2015 estimate (PwC, 2017). Consequently, the scale of exodus in 2016 further exceeds that of the previous years (Clayton & Hereward, 2016). Since 2015, migration has become an integral concern on the European continent. Its integrality has played a domineering role on the political scene, impacted policies; and forecasted to remain a main talking point for several years to come (European Commission, 2016). The migration crisis has increasingly dominated public and expert discourse due to the multifaceted array of opportunities and challenges intertwined with it (European Parliament Research Service, 2016; European Commission, 2016).

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The migrant crisis is forecasted to be continuous as the root causes are yet to be adequately addressed. One raging cause of the migration crisis is “war”. For instance, in the last 20 years, the Central and West African region has witness 25 major conflicts. This has resulted to the forceful displacement of millions across this region (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2017). The findings by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR’s] annual Global Trends Report also reveals that in the last five years, a total of 15 conflicts have re-ignited or re-erupted among eight African countries (Burundi, Central African Republic, Cote d’Ivoire, DRC, Mali, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Libya), three in Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Myanmar), three Middle East countries (Yemen, Syria, and Iraq), and one European country (Ukraine) (PwC, 2017). Amongst the afore-cited conflicts, the Syrian conflict is the largest driver of the migrant crisis. As at 2014, 7.6 million Syrians were internally displaced, while during the same period, 3.88 million sought safe sanctuary in other countries (Chardon, 2016). The Aleppo crisis in 2017 further orchestrated forced migrations. And more recently, the 2018 Crisis in the eastern Ghouta of Syria is assumed to further instigate Syrians out of their domain. Contrary to “political migration” which is largely driven by war; other instigators such as famine due to climate change; poverty and high incidences of joblessness and political instability are amongst reasons “economic migrants” have left their home countries (Upadhyay, 2016; PwC, 2017).

The migration crisis has brought about a number of consequences in Europe. Over the last two years, anti-migration sentiment has orchestrated xenophobic movements, populist discourses as well as nationalist sentiments. This migration crisis has also served as a main weapon of campaign during elections particularly among the far right politicians. Far right activists such as Marine Le Pen of the National Front in France, the Alternative for Germany as well as Freedom Party of Austria have used the anti-migration narrative to win over electorates over (Poddar, 2016). Some pro-migrant populace have also begun to shift their stance. This is manifested particularly amongst the Nordic states which previously welcomed the migrants with open-hands. The initial “open-hands” is gradually transforming into an increasing discontentment and demand for more proactive border measures (Chardon, 2016). Also, the resettlement plan proposed for migrants by the EU is vehemently opposed by the Hungarian government alongside other Eastern states, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland (Faiola, 2016). The anti-migrant narratives have divergent tunes for two core reasons. Firstly, the influx of migrants has surpassed an unprecedented peak. Secondly, most of the migrants who arrived earlier are yet to be settled (Bordignon, Gois, & Moriconi, 2016). To suppress the migrant crisis, the EU has invested surmountable amount of time in negotiations, meetings as well as allocating huge financial resources. An estimated €350 million has been disbursed by the European Union and its member states under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. The European Commission has equally donated a staggering €2.1 billion to the same course, making the “migrant crisis” the largest humanitarian relief project. Additionally, €500 million was allocated to the Syrian Trust Fund; €1 billion was disbursed to the Turkish Facility for Refugees; while €1.8 billion was also allocated to the Emergency Trust Fund in Africa to mitigate the root causes of migration (European Commission, 2016; Chardon, 2016; Wolf & Ossewaarde, 2018). Besides the European Union, researchers in religious organisations and NGOs have waded into the non-ending migrant crisis.

Besides the monetary contributions by the European Union, other governmental and non-governmental agencies, such as the United Nations, International Organisation for Migration, UNHCR, donor organisations, research institutes, International Rescue Committee, and religious leaders (Pope Francis and Archbishop of Canterbury) have equally waded in (Wolf & Ossewaarde, 2018). However, the voice of “business” has

conspicuously been absent (Marcus, 2015). Marcus (2015) however argued that the exclusion of the business sector has resulted to “missed opportunities”, and bases this assertion on the potentiality of businesses been able to recruit skilled and employable migrants, alongside offer vocational training programmes for migrants as an agenda to fast tracking the integration of “well-deserving” migrants. In consonance to the afore-narrated concerns, this paper explores strategies through which politically displaced migrants could be integrated into the Latvian rural communities with the agenda of reinvigorating depopulated rural spaces.

The United Nations alongside the EU have held a series of Summits to address the migration crisis. However, either entities have been able to articulate or envision a specific plan; or have specific commitments been made towards the resettlement of migrants globally (Chardon, 2016; UNICEF, 2017). As articulated by the Human Rights Watch, the summit on migrant crisis was “filled with speeches that veered from vapid platitudes disconnected from real world challenges to get-tough pronouncements about securing borders and stopping irregular migration” (Frelick, 2016). Thus, the secondary objective of this paper is to gain an insight into circumstances, scenarios, and processes that unfold during the migrant crisis, while proposing pragmatic and humane stratagem orchestrated towards the rural economy of Latvia. Hence, this veers the author to one amongst the fastest shrinking populations across the globe—Latvia (Pužulis & Kūle, 2016; Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2017). This demographic remoteness—shrinking—is even more pronounced at countrysides, such as Ķepova, Bērziņi, and Malnava (Pužulis & Kūle, 2016; Raugze, 2012). The countryside’s shrinking is often attributed to “socio-economic structural changes and rescaling and consequent changes of former economic, social and cultural linkages” (Poddar, 2016). This has demonstrated some adverse consequences on the Latvian rural economy, and is forecasted to be exacerbated in the near future (Mangule & Akule, 2015).

In accordance to a report worked out by the Ministry of Economics (National Economy of Latvia), the Latvian economy has the potential to double by 2030 (Mangule & Akule, 2015). However, a cogent impediment to this prognosis is “lack of labour force” (Mangule & Akule, 2015). This is attributed to emigration and low birth rate. Based on the prevalent trend, Mangule and Akule (2015) forecasted that the Latvian population may decrease by almost 200,000 people (population decrease of 610 %) by year 2030; thus opening vacancies for an estimated 200,000 job by 2030.

Consequently, “shrinking requires the need for a set of innovative; knowledge-, evidence- and place-based; coordinated; pro-active; multi-disciplinary; spatial; economic and socially-targeted policy measures” (Pužulis & Kūle, 2016). Thus, achieving such agenda may be through the integration of skilled migrants into the Latvian society, as the proceeding sections of this paper explore such workability.

Materials and Methods

To achieve the objectives of this paper, a number of research approaches were utilised. Firstly, face-to-face interviews were conducted with a total of 91 immigrants within the premises of the Department of Home Affairs (Moore road branch), Durban, South Africa. The interviews commenced in October 2017, and lasted till mid-February, 2018. The inclusive criteria set in this study were “political migrants”. Thus, migrants from nine different countries were involved. These comprised of nationalities of South Sudan, Sudan, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Cameroun, Rwanda, Pakistan, and Central Africa Republic. On the contrary, economic migrants from countries, such as Lesotho, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Swaziland, Namibia, Zambia, Angola, India, Bangladesh, Liberia, and Sierra Leone were excluded during the course of the interviews. A number of migrants were non-English speakers, hence, research assistance who could speak Swahili and

French were employed during these interview processes. The questions posed during the interview centred on four core themes. Firstly, to identify the skills and competencies of migrants (literacy, computer skills, languages spoken, etc.); secondly, to identify the age demographic; thirdly, to enquire if migrants had prior farming experiences or were accustomed to rural lifestyle; and fourthly, to enquire if they were willing to migrate to an eastern European country should they find work opportunities. Alongside the interviews, results from literatures on depopulation, rural communities of Latvia and Latvian agriculture were utilised. Inductive and deductive approaches were used in synthesizing pertinent information. Furthermore, official records and reports were retrieved from the Central Statistics Bureau of Latvia, Rural Support Service, Agriculture Data Service, Latvian Investment and Development Agency, Eurostat—Statistical Office of the European Union as well as the Ministry of Agriculture of Latvia. Analogical deduction and synthesis were made from cartographic materials contained among some of the afore-cited documents. Through the variety of sources used, expert views were sought by using Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) method. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were ensured throughout the course of the study. It has been proven empirically that confidentiality and anonymity often contributes to truthfulness and honesty of remarks made among participants. More so, this was pursued as a means to ensuring ethical standards. Prior interviewing the migrants, permission was sought from the Department of Home Affairs, while the objectives of the research were communicated. Through the aid of content and thematic analysis, the researcher was able to generate six significant themes which are further elaborated in the discussion and result section.

Results and Discussions

The face-to-face interviews alongside document and report analysis was to explore, deduce, and fashion how “skillful-politically” displaced migrants could be integrated into the Latvian rural communities with the agenda of reinvigorating depopulated rural spaces. Thus, the discussions are within the ambit of the following six themes—nexus between economic forecast and labour force; age demographics of migrants; shrinking rural Latvia; decline of the agricultural sector; lack of information about skill and education of migrants; and lack of synergy among stakeholders.

Nexus Between Economic Forecast Versus Labour Force

As earlier cited in this paper, the Latvian economy is forecasted to be doubled by 2030. In 2030, it is further forecasted that an estimated 200,000 job openings will be available. With the current decline in Latvian population, this presumptive prognosis may be far from reality. Thus, to initiate this forecast, a selective employment-based immigration policy should be implemented promptly (Mangule & Akule, 2015). This could be a win-win opportunity for both the Latvian rural communities as well as ambitious and “skillful-political” migrants.

Age Demographics of Migrants

Majority of political migrants interviewed during the course of this study were within the 21-38 age bracket. This age bracket corresponds with a high majority of migrants currently in Europe. As reported by Bordignon et al. (2016), the age brackets of most migrants (asylum seekers) in Italy, Spain, and France ranged between 18 and 34 years old. Male are overly represented amongst these migrants. This may be due to the perceived risk of traveling risky routes which makes women vulnerable to migration experience (Bordignon et al., 2016). Furthermore, most of the migrants interviewed were skilled, or semi-skilled, and had a minimum of

high school qualification (UNICEF, 2017). Considering the ageing population of Latvia, some of these skilled migrants may be absorbed into the Latvian rural communities after a stringent and thorough selective employment-based procedure. Table 1 reveals the age demographics of Latvia in years 2010, 2014, and 2015.

Table 1

Age Structure of Usually Resident Population

	2010	2014	2015
Population—total	2,120,504	1,986,096	1,968,957
aged 0-14	300,294	297,720	300,260
aged 15-24	299,722	212,297	199,613
aged 25-49	736,717	681,427	675,763
aged 50-64	399,594	409,576	406,736
aged 65+	384,177	385,076	386,585
Demographic burden	545	613	625
Average age of population, years	40.4	42.0	42.1

Note. Source: Adapted from Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2017).

Notable from above is the decline in working age population (15-24; 25-49). Thus, working age migrants who are experienced agriculturist or farmers, qualified teachers, medical professionals, as well as paramedic's/care workers for the elderly may be useful among rural communities of Latvia.

Shrinking Rural Communities of Latvia

A population decline of 500,600 was recorded in Latvia between 1996 and 2016 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2017). While the population decline is notable in most regions across Latvia, it is more pronounced among rural communities where populations decline by 20-25% in every five years (Raugze, 2012). The urban population accounted for 68% by the beginning of 2016. An estimated 48% of this urban populace resided in Riga. Though Riga is densely populated, the exact opposite is the case in several rural communities whom are on the verge to becoming ghost spaces in the near future (Pužulis & Kūle, 2016). Shrinking has a number of adverse consequences. Amongst these consequences are depletion of human capital (Audirac, 2014), under use of infrastructure and services, brain drain (Bernt, Cocks, Couch, Grossmann, & Haase, 2012), and decline in municipal taxes due to fewer taxes (Pužulis & Kūle, 2016). Furthermore, “shrinking” has been attributed to the “negative socio-economic processes that have been observed in 52 municipalities” (Bulderberga, 2013, p. 163); and could also result to loss of social, economic, or cultural function which has no close substitute (Pužulis & Kūle, 2016). Hence, the issue of “shrinking” requires more pragmatic measures as to avert “ghost rural spaces” in the years to come.

Decline of the Agricultural Sector

The current trend among rural communities of Latvia indicates that the “successors” or the next generation will not be farming (Apine, 2016). Also, heirs of historic land owners are beginning to sell their property to foreigners as a fast and easy means to becoming wealthy (Apine, 2016). This further puts a strain on the agricultural sector. More so, the decline of enrolment for agricultural related courses at the Latvia University of Agriculture is indicative of a retrogressive trend of the agricultural sector (European Commission, 2016). One of the reasons for this is the “comparatively low prestige of the agricultural profession” (European Commission, 2014). Consequently, replacement and regeneration of academic staff members at the Latvia University of

Agriculture is of grievance concern. Among the 412 academic staff members, 45% are above 50 years, while only 11% of Professors are below 50 years of age (European Commission, 2014). To address this ranging deficit, qualified “politically displaced migrants” who are interested in agricultural related courses can be enrolled for masters or doctoral degrees as an agendum to sustaining the agricultural sector in Latvia; while also recruiting migrant lecturers at this institution of learning. The Latvian agricultural sector is further challenged by low level of qualified personnel in agricultural related field; insufficient utilisation of innovative solution, low competitiveness of farms and enterprises; underdevelopment of risk management systems; inadequacy of energy infrastructure (European Commission, 2016; Skribane & Jekabsone, 2014). Interestingly, during the course of the interviews, about one-third of “politically displaced migrants” did allege they possess agricultural related skills. This attribute was a common feature among nationalities of Central Africa Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroun, and Burundi.

Lack of Synergy Among Stakeholders

A number of NGOs, research institutions, donor organisations, and governmental and non-governmental institutions are directly or indirectly involved in the migrant crisis. Unfortunately, the exclusion of an important role player, business, has conspicuously been absent. The involvement of the business sector alongside NGOs may have facilitated a job-match between host countries and refugees (PwC, 2017). More so, involvement of such key players may have been helpful in training migrants in readiness for the labour market. Such training may include teaching of the local language to politically displaced migrants, similar to that offered by *Jobführerschein* in Germany which provided vocational courses and language lessons to 250 refugees (PwC, 2017).

Lack of Information About Skill and Education of Migrants

Similar to the centre where interviews of this study was conducted, Asylum Centres or Refugee Camps often do not take key data on political or economic migrants. Upon arrival in Europe, pertinent data regarding educational attainment and competencies of migrants are often not taken (Bordignon et al., 2016). Collating such data may be helpful while formulating policies on migrants regarding concerns such social integration and labour market (Bordignon et al., 2016). Such data collation may also facilitate the prompt integration of politically displaced migrants into sectors or regions such migrants are employable without engendering fears among the natives in the labour market.

However, due to resource constraint, the researcher was unable to involve other key stakeholders in the migrant crisis. Furthermore, the views and competency level of 91 participants involved in this study may not truly be reflective of a wider group of politically displaced migrants. Thus, future studies should include major stakeholders as well as a larger group of politically displaced migrants from a variety of countries as opposed to the nine countries used in the current study. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide solutions to the current “polycrisis”, the next section provides some forward thinking and pragmatic measures aimed at reinvigorating the shrinking rural communities of Latvia through the integration of skilled politically displaced migrants.

Conclusion

The European migrant crisis has resulted into heated debates due to the complexity involved in receiving as well as the integration of newly arrived migrants. This complexity has often been exhaustive and beyond the

resource of EU or its member states ability in crafting tailor-made agenda to addressing the on-going crisis. Though the current flow of migrants into Europe has soft-peddled, the greater concern is how to integrate many of the migrants. Instead of taking a breath of relief, the EU alongside its partners should orchestrate formidable polices and stratagem for the short, medium, and long term. One of such formidable stratagem lies in the integration of skilled political migrants into shrinking populations, such as the rural communities of Latvia. This will no doubt serve as an antidote to the ageing population, while reinvigorating the rural spaces through tailor-made agricultural developmental initiatives. Empirical and theoretical evidence both affirm optimism towards the development of host country through the integration of skilled migrants (European Commission, 2016). However, such integration process will require a thorough scrutiny procedure. This paper however suggests that only a manageable migrant size ranging from 1,000-2,500 skilled political migrants should be absorbed at the initial stage. Such migrants could be issued a one-year work permit, and with restrictions in working in specific sectors and zones, so as not to create competition with the natives at the labour market.

Considering the core demographic of politically driven migrants as predominantly working class (age bracket); this provides an array of opportunities for the sustainability of depopulating rural communities of Latvia. Integration of skilled-political migrants can boast competitiveness in the Latvian economy which is lacking (Skribane & Jekabsone, 2014); boast consumption pattern and gross domestic product (GDP); revitalize the declining Latvian agricultural sector; and making the forecasted economy growth a reality. Invariably, the arrival of political migrants increases the EU's public expenditure in the short-run (PwC, 2017). However, in the medium and long term, the integration of migrants into the Latvian labour force will inversely impact the fiscal system. Hence, such working migrants are able to contribute to welfare of the Latvian economy. Furthermore, both the highly skilled and semi-skilled can contribute to the Latvian society. While skilled migrants contribute to the teaching and health care professions; semi-skilled migrants can also work in the labour intensive agricultural sector or provide care to the elderly population. Hence, the earlier governments start harnessing on the positives attributed to migrant crisis, the earlier such crisis can be transformed into developmental opportunities particularly among rural communities where the economies have been stagnated for years (Skribane & Jekabsone, 2014).

However, as an agendum to transforming the European migrant crisis into developmental opportunities (among the rural communities of Latvia), the following measures need to be taken:

- Restoration of trust in European Union's actions between member states and EU citizens (Bordignon et al., 2016);
- Changing the anti-migrant rhetoric through media;
- Deportation of non-qualifying migrants (economic migrants) who came through illegal routes;
- Tightening of borders through smart security approaches and negotiations with global military personnel;
- Forge more multi-lateral agreements such as the 2016 EU-Turkish deal with more countries, while sustaining the present deals;
- Proactive involvement of the business community alongside other "migrant crisis" stakeholders;
- Address "push factors" (e.g., political instability and climate change) and "pull factors" (work opportunities) through sustainable foreign, economic, and trade policies.

Should the afore-cited measures be put in place, illegal flow of migrants will be drastically abated; racism, discrimination, and other cultural barriers could be averted. This also can orchestrate a tailor-made integration

of migrants. This stratagem may equally be cascaded among East European and other EU nations that are experiencing shrinking in population due to the prominence of “age-populating”.

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