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Dual Nature of International Circular Migration

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Abstract

The paper deals with the international circular migration which has globally become a buzzword in scientific, political, and administrative circles since the new century. The article concentrates on an unknown feature of the circular migration, namely its dialectic nature, which encompasses both event and system characteristics. This would be the common root of false ideas surrounding human circulation. The literature echoes wide variety of conceptualisations of international circular migration. However, the investigation and application of double characteristic is absent. On one hand, circular migration is a type of migration as a simple event, on the other hand that is a repeat process or a complete system. The main aim of the article is to discuss the event-system dilemma in general and to provide a sort of practical solution with empirical evidence that comes from Hungary in particular. Moreover, the authors contribute to the clarification of the general concept of human circular mobilities.

Keywords: *International circular migration; circular spatial mobilities; event; system*

Introduction

In his seminal work, the famous French demographer Louis Henry (1976) presented analytical methods for the pure investigation of life course phenomena. Fertility, mortality, and nuptiality were discussed in exhaustive ways with brilliant examples. However, he devoted little attention to the bipolar events, just as moves and migrations. These were exemptions, where the elementary analytical objective, the elimination of the influence of population size in question, became blurred due to the bipolar spatial characteristic of moves. The population at risk could be conceptualised even harder on the topics of return and serial migration in this book. Return migration consists of two steps. Serial migration had three moves onward, without any return (Henry, 1976, p. 196). The main feature of the territorial mobility subchapter was the dominant role of measurement at the expense of analysis. Meanwhile, thematic holes developed about circularity, for example, in that case if circular migration might have been distinguished from serial migration due to different populations at risk (Ossman, 2013).

Continuing Henry's logic, this paper's main aim is to clarify the dual nature of circular migration, which might be one of the inherent characteristics of human circulation. The study of entire human circular mobilities is out of the scope of this paper. We stress only on international circular migration. Within this research agenda, we investigate the return of long-term international immigrants to Hungary. Naturally, we do not restrict our argumentation to circulators. The first-time international immigrants serve as a useful reference group to circulators. Using the United Nations (1998) recommendation on long-term international migration, first-time immigrants and circular immigrants are foreigners who stayed more than one year in the receiving country, in our case, Hungary (Poulain et al. 2006). Our second aim

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is to contribute to the development of statistics of long-term international immigration and the pure comparability of full scope administrative data at different international levels.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. We start a critical literature review to depict approaches of international circular migration. Afterwards, we turn to migration concepts and terms relevant to circular migration and we articulate the core considerations of event-system dilemma. Diminishing the degree of abstraction, we provide an empirical example mirroring the inherent dimensions of international circular migration. In the final section, conclusions are presented.

International circular migration

The ‘circulation’ with its own meaning of ‘circular mobilities’ is a recurring pattern of spatial moves in consecutive time periods of human history starting with repeat moves in ancient times through nomadism till ‘circular migration’ of present days (Petersen, 1975; Chapman and Prothero 1985; Manning, 2013). However, multiple residential movements from one home to another have become increasingly frequent during the epoch of globalisation (Behr and Gober, 1982). The popularity of circular migration erected from the hypothesis of ‘triple-win solution’ without any empirical verifications. Unfortunately, the popular term circular migration has developed a buzzword in European and global scientific, political, and administrative circles since the new century due to the mantra surrounding it (Vertovec, 2013). The transnational promise of a ‘triple-win solution’ has failed to deliver (King and Lulle, 2016; Vankova, 2020).

In general, there is a high demand to create a harmonised definition of international circular migration and how it can be measured and compared between countries. To fulfil this aim, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the Conference of European Statisticians produced a report (UNECE, 2016). The members of the Task Force tried to collect and synthesise state of the art on international circular migration from the point of view of register-based macro-statistics. They compared some selected concepts and tried to operationalise some dimensions that need to be considered when defining and measuring international circular migration. Out of five dimensions, three functioned in practice embedded in the spatio-temporal framework (Repetition of move, Directionality, Time). The remaining two – the ‘Purpose of move and Developmental impact’ – were excluded from statistical definition. The concept of circular migration was separated from temporary migration, seasonal migration, tourism and commuting as one-way moves and return migration as a complete cycle in appropriate ways. Later, under the umbrella of spatiality they created a disputable new term: “A migration loop is defined as a sequence of crossing of international borders that begins and ends in the same country” (UNECE, 2016, p. 11). Based on this interpretation, circular migration consists of at least four moves and completes at least two loops. On the one hand, the innovators did not explain what the difference was between migration loop and return migration (migration cycle). On the other ‘at least four moves’ as a minimum criterion contradicted the at least three-move consensus about circular migration in the literature cited widely above (emigration–immigration–emigration from outward perspective; immigration–emigration–immigration from inward perspective).

In our opinion, two fundamental problems have emerged from the utilisation of the ‘migration loop or completed cycle’ ideas, in fact. First, the migration loop (return migration) became the unit of measurement ahead of a simple migration. Second, they prioritised



outward perspective and emigration as first step. Measurement may also happen from an inward perspective where immigration is the first event of the circulatory system. From methodological angles, these two perspectives of migration measurement are completely equivalent to one another (see Table 1.).

The time dimension of circular migration was divided into two parts. With the help of duration of stay, they distinguished long-term international migration from short-term one. Long-term permanent migration has been correctly regarded as statistically aggregated and administratively institutionalised human behaviour related to work, housing, family life-cycle event, amenities and other reasons. The realms of short-term temporary migration have been, however, completely different phenomena (Lynne, 1990; Williams and Hall, 2002; Gyeny, 2020). As final results, the acceptable and applicable statistical definitions were created for mainly the utilisation of countries. The statistical definition proposed for long-term international circular migrants was the following: “A circular migrant is a person who has crossed the national borders of the reporting country at least 3 times over a 10-year period, each time with duration of stay (abroad or in the country) of at least 12 months.” (UNECE 2016, p. 19). We must stress that the reporting countries would be sending or receiving ones and the migrants would be the own nationals of the country or foreign citizens. Finally, the measuring methods of international circular migration could be decided by individual countries in the light of harmonised international migration statistics (UN, 1998) and the proposed definitions (UNECE, 2016).

From a statistical point of view, the international temporary and permanent migration have been distinguished from each other by the length of stay of movers in receiving countries. The time of cross-border travel and the role of transit zones has become negligible due to the technological development of transport facilities around the globe. The same individual may become a temporary migrant four times within a calendar year, but a permanent migrant must be once, legally. These discrete time intervals of stay provide the periods of repeat migrations. It is interesting that the return move has been a time interval criterion neither from the former destination(s) nor from the origin country’s perspective (OECD 2008, p. 165). The separate return move could be conceptualised as a simple travel back without stay and/or time limit at home. Emigration, together with the return, means a completed cycle. The multiple periods and cycles may transform a new time-related quality, rhythm, a basic concept of music.

Turning to the European context, in this paper we scrutinise the European Union (EU)’s approach of ‘temporary and circular migration’, as well. This is a particular conceptualisation of circular migration. Defining circular migration as a temporary type or form of migration bears inevitable conceptual and analytical challenges in migration studies. The proponents of type (IOM, 2008; Triandafyllidou and Richard-Guay, 2019) might overlook that circular migration was encompassed into a completely new entity, namely a system. They often muddled different types in a general one of or the latest element of recurring migration series. Later they generalised the last observed part on the whole system. They did not consider the systematic nature of homogenous or heterogeneous elements and the necessity of a clear distinction between inward and outward perspectives in circular migration studies. Without deep analysis, labelling a general type may attract generalised ideas and practices (EC, 2011; EC EMN, 2012). Minor misinterpretations might come from conceptualisation in which the final type of migration is generalised on the whole system (Vertovec, 2013; Hugo, 2014; Weber and Saarela, 2017; Dumitrescu, 2020). They may overestimate one of the characteristics of

circular migration, namely self-resemblance (Weber and Saarela, 2019). The self-resemblance comes from the special combination of previous multiple selection mechanisms. On the one hand, self-selection happens by the migrants' own decisions; on the other hand, migrants are selected by other bodies (Glouftsiou, 2018; Illés and Kincses, 2018). It is possible to analyse circular migration by any of its last phases and to try to extend it over the next elements. Distinguishing 'circular migration' from 'pioneer migration' and some 'veteran migration' migrations just as return, onward and serial migration can be traced by analytical tools (using serial numbers).

According to vast majority of recent literature on human circular migration, the temporary migrations were strongly interconnected with circular migrations in the new century. The inherently multiple return character of circulation was pushed into the temporary arena within the EU context. This meant that the short-term duration of stay was overestimated over the long term. The undividable conceptualisation and practice of circular migration and temporary migration that has emerged in the European Union (EC, 2011; McLoughlin et al. 2011) might cause some confusion regarding circular migration. If temporary migration is a first-rank type of migration and it has an inseparable hierarchic correlation between 'temporary and circular migration', it would be logical at first sight that circular migration would be a new first-rank type of migration similarly to its so-called antecedent (pair), namely temporary migration.

Recent migration flows are conceptualised as a diverse and fragmented compendium of one-way migrants, two-way returnees and onward migrants, three-or-more-step serial migrants and circulators from the point of view of serial numbers (Montanari and Staniscia, 2016; Cohen, 2018; King and Okolski, 2018). One of the simplest distinct-space and distinct-time migratory event and/or systems is return migration which consists of two interconnecting moves. However, as opposed to one-way migration theory there is no comprehensive return (two-way) migration theory (Nadler et al. 2016; Lados and Hegedűs, 2019). Empirical experiences of return migration were partially synthesised. The distinguishing feature of return move from simple immigration was labelled with the failure–success continuum (de Haas et al., 2015).

Data and methods

Large scale consensus has been existing for more data production on circulatory movements in the literature. There is no preference for information sources. Conventional population censuses, surveys, and administrative registers data are reliable for gaining solid facts irrespective of quantitative or qualitative techniques. However, one methodological perspective has emerged as a common part and parcel of data gathering on circular migration. This is the longitudinal way of measuring (Findlay et al., 2015; Panke, 2018; Strockmeyer et al., 2019).

Based on some elements of Hungarian research results discussed under the umbrella of relevant literature and practice it must be stated that the three possible perspectives (inward, outward, hybrid approach) of the investigation of international circular migration are equivalent to each other from methodological point of views (see Tab. 1). However, in the light of the research subject, aim, scope, area and time frames, privileged perspective might exist from practical angles, in social reality. Therefore, homogenous circular migration data is provided in this paper in which some long-term international migrants became circulators with the help of longitudinal methodology. We used an inward spatial perspective and



concentrated on foreign citizens who had immigrant status in Hungary from 2006 till 2016. The individual data on first-time immigrants and circulators is examined by using different serial numbers that depict their last immigrations. The cross-tabulation by available dimensions (age, sex, family status, country of citizenship) provided a large variety of empirical analyses from quasi-national interest. However, the cross-tabulation of first-time and circular immigrant data by country of citizenship might also create real international statistical interest (Martin, 2011).

Table 1. Three spatial perspectives of international circular migration by nationality and timing from the statistical practice of measurement approach

Spatial perspectives	Inward	Outward	Hybrid
Nationality	Foreign citizens	Nationals	All migrants
Timing (duration of stay)	Permanent or Temporary	Permanent or Temporary	Mixed (Permanent and/or Temporary)

Source: The authors' own ideas

We emphasised the necessity of perspective and dataset types of circular migration above from a methodological point of view. Now, we turn to the empirical (macro-statistical) practice analysis below. The data came from the continuous registration system of the Immigration and Nationality Office. Immigrants are natural persons who had the legal right to reside in Hungary with the intention of staying at least one year. The data were stored by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office due to legal requirements of personal data processing. We obtained a reconstructed new data set with primary data files on newcomers and circulators. In this database, foreign natural persons acquired immigrant status in Hungary several number of times (1–X). So, we distinguished first-time immigrants (1) from international circulators (2–X) by serial numbers (Illés and Kincses, 2012).

Empirical example

In this section, we would like to provide a kind of demographic solution to the challenge of event-system dualism, the core subject of this paper. We highlight empirical facts erected from our implementation of the highly theoretical concept, namely circular migration. Research in Hungary on international circular migration started in 2007 motivated by presenting an alternative to the conceptualisation of the term ‘temporary and circular migration’ (EC, 2011). We utilised permanent (long-term) international migration data to create a kind of circular migration. We proved in the national statistical practice that permanent circular migration data have been extracted from available international migration datasets (Illés and Kincses, 2012), harmonised by United Nations (1998) worldwide.

Below, as an illustration, we examine the family status structure of first-time immigrants and circulators utilising serial numbers. This is a sort of general macro-statistical solution on the double nature of circular migration. Single people dominate among all immigrants in Hungary. This finding completely conforms with the research results on international immigration in Europe and all over the World. According to Hungarian findings, single and married people had the most significant shares (59.0%, 33.8%) among all immigrants in 2006–2016. The proportions of divorced and widowed immigrants were small (5.0%, 2.3%). Perhaps one of the most exciting findings was that the percentage of single people (62.2 per cent) among the circular migrants is higher than that among the first-time immigrants (58.3 per cent), if we sum the pre-crisis (2006–2008), crisis (2009–2012) and post-crisis (2013–2016) periods. This finding correlates to Constant and Zimmermann’s (p. 512) result: “Those immigrants who are

the most mobile and open to circular migration are the middle-aged, male and single migrants”. People with single marital status are somewhat more prone to circulate – underlined by Rosa Weber and Jan Saarela (p. 20) from another migration context.

Table 2. Family status of international first-time immigrants (1) and circular immigrants (2–X) by serial numbers, who entered Hungary between 2006 and 2016, (%)

2006-2008						
Family status	Serial number of entering					Total
	1	2	3	4–X	(2–X)	
Single	47.4	52.6	56.6	57.8	53.6	48.3
Married	44.2	39.9	37.4	36.9	39.3	43.5
Widowed	3.2	2.8	2.5	2.2	2.7	3.1
Divorced	5.2	4.7	3.6	3.0	4.4	5.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

2009-2012						
Family status	Serial number of entering					Total
	1	2	3	4–X	2–X	
Single	56.3	62,5	67,2	68,6	65.2	57,7
Married	35,6	30,3	27,0	26,5	28,5	34,5
Widowed	2,3	2,0	1,8	1,6	1,9	2,2
Divorced	5,8	5,2	4,0	3,3	4,4	5,6
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

2013-2016						
Family status	Serial number of entering					Total
	1	2	3	4–X	2–X	
Single	70.6	65.7	56.8	43.5	64.3	68.9
Married	23.3	29.3	36.7	49.5	30.5	25.2
Widowed	1.7	1.3	1.7	2.8	1.4	1.6
Divorced	4.4	3.7	4.8	4.2	3.9	4.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: authors' own computation

Further interesting findings emerge from the database if we divide the time series driven by the economic crisis period in Hungary in three parts (see Table 2.). In general, the ‘circular way of life’ might not be typical of immigrants who have legal partnerships. In other words, the legally married status may not promote the start of a circular career of individuals. However, the marital status might help restart the well-established circular practices during an economic recovery period. The proportion of married circulators was the highest within 4–X (four times and more) within immigrants in the post-crisis period (49.5%).

In other words, the presence of family members either in the departure or destination country increased the probability of circulation with 4 and higher serial numbers. These empirical facts strengthen Vertovec’s (p. 1055-1056) hypothesis on the likelihood of circular migration: “Repeat movements are likeliest among young unmarried men; this likelihood falls with marriage and increases again with children”.

The cross-tabulation of all immigrants divided by serial numbers combined with family status may inspire us with several hypotheses and /or guesses. We want to stress that Table 2. reflects the more stable family status structure of circulators compared to first-time immigrants. The



continuous increase of movements of single people and the decrease in movements of married people are significant within first-time immigrants. Firstly, we hypothesise that the highly changeable character of international migration comes mainly from new immigrants (first-time movers), rather than their more experienced co-fellows, circulators (multiple movers). Secondly, we guess that circulators borrow some stability within migratory flows, in general, not only in terms of characteristics of movers but also dynamics of movements, as well (Kincses, 2020ab). All in all, we may hypothesise with significant probability that the highly changeable nature of international migratory flows comes mainly from first-time migrants, onward migrants, serial migrants and return migrants rather than circulators.

Conclusions

The conceptualisation and measurement must be the initial phase of discovering international circular migration (Wickramasekara, 2011; Skeldon, 2012; Hugo, 2014; Vankova, 2020). In this paper, we try to synthesise the characteristic differences between the recognition of circular migration as a system compared to an event (a type). For analytical and practical reasons, we first argue for the conceptualisation of the system nature of multiple return migration, namely circular migration as a whole entity. Secondly, the last phase of any circular migration system can be recognised as a simple event of a migratory process that could be typified as a part of the system. In other words, the individualised migrations by serial numbers could be classified by usual migration types. The last individual migration with serial numbers could be classified as any migration type. But this is not valid for the whole circular migration system due to the potentially mixed motivational elements. Only the classification of the last sequence of the system bears recent importance from practical purposes. For instance, the migrants' actual legal status would be an example in the receiving country.

Circular migration is nothing else than a multiple return migration with a minimum of three elements, where the 'type-system dilemma' could be multiplied mechanically with the increase of serial numbers of last migration, based on linear thinking. At first, it seems that circular migration may become more blurred than return migration through this lens. However, the system nature fortifies at the expense of the type side with the multiplication of returns (moves). In our opinion, according to the latest separate move of circular migration can be conceptualised as a type with two restrictions. First, the perspective of the last sending country could vary in the question of judging the type. Second, the circulators on their own may classify their moves as different types due to inherently multiple motivational patterns. If we connect serial numbers to every individual move within the circulatory system, these restrictions remain intact. The last serial number on its echoes the force of the system character. The bigger the serial number, the more robust the system nature of circular migration. If the serial number becomes lesser and lesser, the event nature would fortify (system nature could weaken), till the third movers minimum requirements of circular migration.

The effect of the global financial-economic crisis (2008-2012) worldwide through the mass-mixed flows of people to the hearth of Europe (2013-2016) and the Brexit process (2016-2020) have interrupted most of the research on circular migration, the pilot projects, and policy making activities, as well. Beyond the effect of these external forces, the absence of recognition of circular migration might serve as a potential barrier to the success of circulatory policies. This study attempts to reconceptualise circular migration which could be regarded

both as purification and an extension of the initial EU's concept of 'temporary and circular migration'. We have investigated an intrinsic force, namely the dual nature of circular migration. We have stated that the circular migration has the event and system nature at the same time.

The Hungarian example provided homogenous circular migration data from an inward perspective in this paper. Some long-term international migrants became circulators with the help of longitudinal methodology. From a practical approach, we utilised an inward spatial perspective and concentrated on foreign citizens staying immigrant status in Hungary from 2006 till 2016. The cross-tabulation by an available dimension (family status) – based on the recent practice of UN or other international organisations about long-term international data gathering – provided a chance for empirical analysis that confirmed that the presence of family members either in the departure or destination country increased the probability of circulation with 4 and higher serial numbers. The new data collection system could develop if individual countries produce non-circular and circular immigrant data (Martin, 2011; Krisjane et al., 2016) by serial numbers. The reliable data of country of citizenship allows the production of so-called 'mirror statistics' in bilateral and/or multilateral relations (Hansen et al., 2011; UNECE, 2016, p. 20). The added value would be the indirect information on emigration from sending countries, regions, continents. Meanwhile, the requirements of an outward perspective would also be fulfilled.

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