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ARTICLE

(In)voluntary Non-migrants? Unfulfilled Migration Intentions under Emigration Restrictions

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Abstract

The article addresses the question of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary immobility under emigration restrictions. Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with people whose family members intended to emigrate from the Polish People's Republic and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic but who have not fulfilled their intentions, it examines the role of the would-be migrant's agency in driving the immobility outcome under the narrow opportunity structure for international mobility. The analysis of reasons for the emigration intentions of formerly aspiring migrants having remained unfulfilled demonstrates that the boundary between voluntary and involuntary immobility – similar to that of voluntary versus forced migration – is often blurred. The studied cases suggest it is more justified to view immobility through the lens of a continuum of (in)voluntariness rather than as a voluntary-involuntary binary. Moreover, the study shows how the blurriness of the boundary between voluntary and involuntary immobility may be understood through changes over time in the reasons for the non-realization of one's migration intentions.

Keywords: (in)voluntary; non-migrants; immobility; voluntariness; emigration restrictions

Introduction

People may have different spatial aspirations (Carling 2014): some aspire to remain in place, others aspire to move, and there are also people who do not have clear aspirations to (im)mobility (Mata-Codesal 2018). Spatial aspirations (or their absence) are intertwined with individual capabilities and the surrounding opportunity structure, defining one's ability/capability to fulfil their spatial aspirations, leading to either mobility or immobility outcomes (Carling 2002; Carling and Schewel 2018; De Haas 2021; Schewel 2020). Aspirations to migrate, once formed but eventually not fulfilled, may be either *unrealized* (when they turn into a preference to stay) or *repressed* (when people are prevented from migrating, forced to stay against their will, Carling 2014). Which process we are dealing with depends on the level of agency (or the degree of voluntariness) on the part of an individual in arriving at the immobility outcome.

How should *being prevented* from migrating and thus the *repression* of spatial aspirations (or specifically of migration intentions) be defined? In the contexts with restrictions on emigration, one could adopt a narrow understanding of these categories, limiting them to cases where one's emigration aspirations were stifled by a restrictive political regime. Adoption of such a perspective could theoretically yield a fairly straightforward distinction between involuntary and voluntary immobility under emigration restrictions. Involuntary immobility would in this case apply to those who were not allowed to emigrate by the regime, including those who had not been issued a passport

or had not been given permission to leave, for example. There has been, however, a rich literature within the field of migration studies acknowledging the limited usefulness of the voluntary-forced dichotomy (Atak and Crépeau 2021; Bartram 2015; Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018; De Haas 2021; Fussell 2012; Richmond 1993). With this study, referring to the aspiration-ability/capability model (Carling 2002; Carling and Schewel 2018; Schewel 2020) and the concepts of voluntariness and acceptable alternatives (Olsaretti 2004; 1998), I show how this critique of the voluntary-involuntary binary expands to the study of immobility as an outcome of the migration decision-making process. I do so by considering a specific case where people's aspirations and capabilities are subject to restrictions imposed on emigration by their own state. To this end, I use family accounts of unrealized emigration from a highly emigration-restrictive context: communist Poland and the USSR. The narrow opportunity structure for international mobility in communist Poland and the USSR concerned exit from the home country — emigration was tightly controlled throughout most of the communist era (Chandler 1998; Light 2012; Stola 2015). Naturally, not all aspiring migrants from the communist era who did not fulfill their intentions did so because they faced objective external (state-imposed) obstacles that they could not overcome. Some simply abandoned their desires to move (Coulter 2013), shifting their spatial aspirations to aspirations to stay put (Carling 2014) or succumbing to constraints and becoming acquiescently immobile (Schewel 2020).

This article emerges from a research project on family stories concerning unrealized emigration experienced under emigration restrictions and their potential intergenerational impacts. Within this research project, I initially planned to interview people whose families resided in the Polish People's Republic or the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and experienced involuntary immobility in the narrow sense; that is, those whose members intended to emigrate abroad but their intentions were repressed by the authorities. The two contexts were selected for their differing degree of restrictiveness of policies toward emigration in the communist era (see the contextual section) and the differing accessibility of migration destinations for Poles and Russians nowadays. However, while recruiting participants to the study, I began to realize that even in such emigration-restrictive contexts, the divide between what could be deemed voluntary and involuntary immobility is not always clear. It turned out that what people described as involuntary (defined narrowly as "not being allowed to emigrate"), in some cases, allowed some degree of agency on the part of non-migrants in driving the immobility outcome. I started questioning the distinction between *voluntary* and *involuntary non-migrants* and asked the question as to what extent this dichotomization is useful to describe the experiences of people who had intended to emigrate under emigration restrictions but ultimately did not fulfill their emigration intentions.

While such voluntariness-related considerations have been made with regard to migration as an outcome (Bartram 2015; Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018; De Haas 2021; Fussell 2012; Richmond 1993), they have relatively rarely been applied to immobility (see Robins 2022; Transiskus and Bazarbash 2024; Mallick and Hunter 2024; Rabbani, Cotton and Friend 2022 for exceptions; see also Schewel 2020; Mata-Codesal 2018). With this article, I contribute to this recently burgeoning strand of spatial decision-making research that goes against "mobility bias" (Schewel 2020) and represents the "immobility turn" in migration studies (Bélanger and Silvey 2020; Cairns and Clemente 2023). I expand on its proposition to view the voluntariness of immobility as a spectrum rather than as a dichotomy. The scope of my interest differs from the scope of previous studies in that I draw my empirical examples from a different institutional context and focus on reasons for non-migration among those who had intended to emigrate (the longest path in Mata-Codesal's ability/desire model to immobility, 2018, 6) and often had made formal attempts to go abroad. With this, I provide an empirical case on immobility that does not easily fit into the voluntary/involuntary dichotomy, arguing for the need to look at the immobility outcome through the lens of a continuum of (in)voluntariness, rather than the involuntary-voluntary binary that results in discrete categories of immobility placed within the quadrants of the aspiration-capability framework (Schewel 2020).

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Voluntariness in (non-)migration decisions

While migration has often been categorized as either forced or voluntary (the latter frequently labeled as "economic"), a growing number of scholars researching migration decision-making processes have advocated for the need to move away from the voluntary-involuntary/forced migration dichotomy and rather to speak of the continuum of experience (Bartram 2015; Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018; De Haas 2021; Fussell 2012; Richmond 1993). There is a developing consensus, not only that the boundary between these two categories is blurred but also that most decisions to migrate fall nearer the center of the continuum rather than at one of its ends (Bartram 2015; Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018; De Haas 2021; Fussell 2012; Richmond 1993; see also Easton-Calabria and Sturridge 2025).

It has been argued that a defining feature of the volitional dimension of migration and a key criterion for speaking of a degree of (in)voluntariness of a move, and thus the level of agency exhibited by taking a decision to migrate, is not just the freedom of choosing to migrate or the absence of coercion to move but the availability of acceptable alternatives and the agency of acting on them (Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018; Long 2013; cf. Olsaretti 2004; Ottonelli and Torresi 2013). Rejection of any such alternatives means exercising one's agency and prevents calling a decision fully involuntary (Bartram 2015; cf. Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo 1989). What should be understood under an "acceptable" alternative is not fully clear, however. Bartram (2015) proposes deeming the available alternatives to be unacceptable (or deeming their rejection reasonable/justified) if they would lead to human rights violations, including violations of the right to freedom of conscience. What constitutes an acceptable alternative is thus subject to the perception of the "labelers" (Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018). For the sake of this study, I adopt an approach in which I let my interviewees be the labelers — both with regard to the (un)acceptability of available alternatives and their emigration intentions having been repressed (thus regarding their perceptions as "truth," Easton-Calabria and Sturridge 2025). This links to the idea that one's aspirations and capabilities — as determinants of (non-)migration — are to be considered within given *perceived* (rather than objective) geographical opportunity structures (De Haas 2021). The focus on perceptions rather than "objective features of external conditions" along with a continuous vision of the involuntariness (forcedness) of migration underlies the conceptualization proposed by Echterhoff and colleagues (2020). Migration literature has recently been enriched by attempts to quantitatively measure the degree of perceived migration forcedness, the most prominent approach being that of Niemann and Hertel (2024), who, grounding their approach in self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2012) with its continuum between autonomous and controlled motivation, viewed migration forcedness as composed of two factors, locus of causality and options for choice.

Despite its undeniable applicability to immobility, a similar line of reasoning has until recently been largely absent from research considering non-migration as an outcome of the migration decision-making process. Drawing a line between voluntary and forced migration entails direct political consequences (Kollar and Boucher 2023; Ottonelli and Torresi 2023), which makes it, as well as the question of who should be the labeler, a persistent and controversial one. Delineating voluntary from involuntary immobility is not that directly linked to political questions and thus less pressing. Emerging scholarship has acknowledged that immobility among those who aspired to move can be either voluntary or involuntary (Carling 2002; Lubkemann 2008; Mata-Codesal 2018; Schewel 2020). The argument that setting a boundary between voluntary and involuntary may be as problematic as in mobility-focused research has, however, not received much attention until recently and the evidence for the blurriness of the boundary remains scarce (for exceptions, see Mallick and Hunter 2024; Rabbani, Cotton and Friend 2022; Robins 2022). A notable exception is the study by Robins (2022), who proposed applying a "spectrum approach to immobility," noting that immobility motivated by a sense of duty to objects of various scales (he focused on scales higher than a family unit) does not easily lend itself to a dichotomous classification. He focused on people (whom he labeled as "active" stayers) who rejected the emigration alternative, considering it

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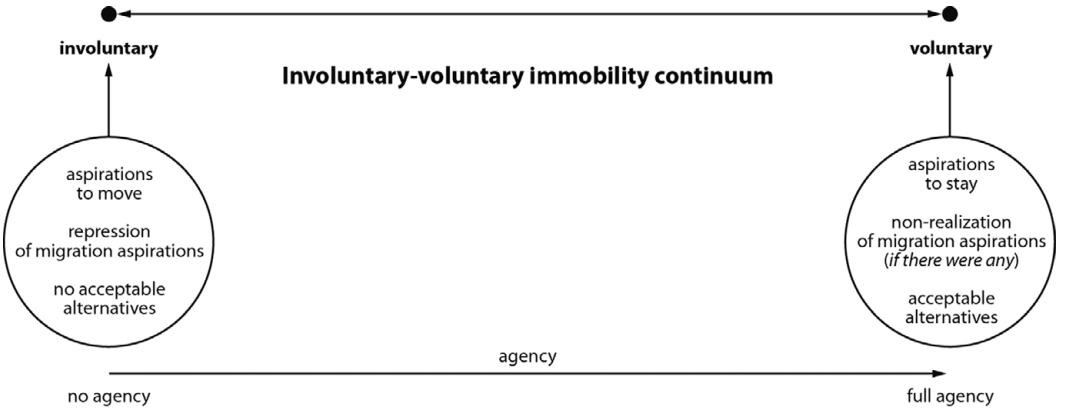

Figure 1. (In)voluntariness of Immobility: A Conceptual Model.

unacceptable despite having the capability to act on it, and who thus can be considered neither purely voluntary nor involuntary. In this study, I follow Robin's suggestion to look for other such "liminal cases" where immobility cannot be easily classified as either voluntary or involuntary. With this, I highlight the usefulness of the metaphor of a continuum of (in)voluntariness to study immobility (see Figure 1 for a conceptual model) instead of extra immobility categories distinguished based on the presence/absence of a desire/aspiration and ability/capability that are linked to the involuntary-voluntary binary, as has been done previously (Mata-Codesal 2018; Schewel 2020; Transiskus and Bazarbash 2024). The involuntary-voluntary immobility continuum extends between the two ideal-typical poles, with a gradual change from involuntary immobility (involving the repression of migration aspirations by the lack of acceptable alternatives and no agency in driving the immobility outcome) to voluntary immobility (involving non-realization of migration aspirations [if there were any] by the presence of acceptable alternatives and full agency in taking the non-migration decision), and vice versa.

The idea of a continuum of voluntariness by migration decision-making has recently been criticized by Ottonelli and Torresi (2023), who argued for the usefulness of separating voluntariness from forcedness and against blurring the distinction, which, in their view, may entail high political costs. While these arguments have merit with regard to migration as an outcome, they seem to be less applicable to immobility, which does not directly link to normative evaluations. Moreover, it is unclear how classification facilitates understanding of the "interplay between the elements of forcedness and the elements of voluntariness in migrants' decisions" (Ottonelli and Torresi 2023, 413), while the continuum perspective hampers it. An attempt to place voluntariness on a continuum is indeed a simplification of the complex multidimensional reality (yet one that may be instrumental in studying, for example, the consequences of a decision to stay immobile), but this is even more so for dichotomization.

Data and methods

This article draws from the empirical material collected in 2021–2022 within the framework of a project on family stories concerning unrealized emigration and their potential intergenerational impacts:[1] 23 semi-structured in-depth interviews that were conducted with people whose families resided in communist Poland (14 interviews) or Soviet Russia (9 interviews) before the fall of communist rule, and whose members had intended to emigrate abroad yet ultimately did not fulfill their migration intentions. Given the focus of the wider research project from which this article emerged, most of my interviewees were descendants of non-migrants, although many of them had their own childhood memories of their parents' non-migration experience;[2] three interviewees were non-migrants themselves. I conducted the interviews in Polish and Russian via free internet

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communicators (WhatsApp, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger, depending on the participant's preference). I recorded all the interviews (including a verbal informed consent obtained from the interviewee at the beginning of the interview),[3] transcribed them verbatim in the source language, and coded them using the MAXQDA software. All participant names used in this article are pseudonyms; I also anonymized some geographical names. At the end of each quote is the participant's pseudonym, gender (M/F), age, country of residence of would-be migrants when non-migration occurred, and year/period when the non-migrant(s) attempted to emigrate.

I reached my research participants through my social networks and social media (including institutional fan pages and Facebook thematic groups) and various Internet forums. Recruitment — with the target group being dispersed and unnetworked — proved challenging, especially in the Russian case, where a general distrust towards social science research was coupled with the potential resistance to talking to a foreign researcher under the restrictive foreign agents' law. In an attempt to go beyond my social networks in recruiting Russian participants, I additionally targeted three kinds of communities: communities gathering emigrants from Russia at different destinations and would-be emigrants from Russia (as they likely overrepresent close relatives of the involuntary non-migrants from the Soviet era, Brunarska and Ivlevs 2023); ethnic communities resident in Russia but having their historical homelands outside of the country (for example, Volga Germans; as those potentially showing higher pre-1991 emigration intentions rates); and communities gathering people interested in genealogy and family history (as those potentially more knowledgeable of their family history). Recruitment was hampered by the fact that would-be emigrants had been unlikely to speak freely about their aspirations under communism and later about their unrealized emigration, including with close friends and relatives, which restricted the awareness of the experience both within and across families.

The resultant sets of interviewees were dominated by highly educated people who had a higher chance of being reached via the utilized recruitment channels and were more likely to respond to the invitation to take part in the study (they were, however, also likely to be overrepresented in the target population). The sets were also biased towards people with foreign roots — whose ancestors belonged to one of the ethnic groups with their homelands outside of the USSR[4]. However, members of such ethnic groups were also likely overrepresented among the then aspiring emigrants due to the selective ethnicity-based emigration policies (see the contextual section). The participants included nine women and five men (Poland) and four women and five men (Russia), resident both in Poland/Russia (eight and five interviews, respectively) and abroad (six and four interviews), aged from 34 to 73 and from 37 to 68, respectively. The time when their family members intended to emigrate ranged from the late 1960s to the late 1980s in the Polish case, and from the 1920s to the 1990s in the Russian case (see Table 1 for an overview of interviewees and the contextual section below for an overview of constraints to emigration in these periods).

Among the questions asked to research participants were questions about circumstances under which aspiring migrants intended to emigrate, reasons for eventually not realizing their migration intentions, the persistence of migration aspirations/intentions over time, and migration experience in the family before and after the unrealized emigration experience (see the Online Appendix for full interview guides). In analyzing the interview data for the sake of this article, I focused on non-migrants' agency in driving the immobility outcome, coding interview fragments on would-be migrants' migration aspirations and capabilities, and the presence of acceptable alternatives at different stages of the decision-making process. To this end, I coded different reasons for migration intentions remaining unfulfilled,[6] trying to imagine where each case could fall on the involuntary-voluntary immobility continuum, and seeking to categorize the reasons with an external locus of causality into different types of obstacles.

Historical-geographical context

The unrealized emigration experiences in the families of my Russian interlocutors stretched over 70 years, roughly corresponding to the period of Soviet rule in Russia. In the case of my Polish

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Table 1. Overview of Interviewees

Non-migrant(s) lived in …	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Perspective[5]	Year/period when the non-migrant(s) attempted to emigrate
PL	Aneta	F	44	descendant	1977
PL	Halina	F	73	non-migrant	1969; 1981
PL	Iwona	F	57	non-migrant	1985; 1995
PL	Maria	F	68	descendant; non-migrant	1968; 1981
PL	Jan	M	51	descendant	1980–1986
PL	Monika	F	46	descendant	1982
PL	Aleksandra	F	34	descendant	1980–1985
PL	Tomasz	M	43	descendant	1982
PL	Katarzyna	F	52	descendant	1979–1985
PL	Tadeusz	M	53	descendant	1982
PL	Adam	M	38	descendant	1988
PL	Grzegorz	M	38	descendant	1987
PL	Kamila	F	55	descendant	1969–1971
PL	Ewelina	F	54	descendant	1970s; 1980
RU	Pavel	M	63	descendant	1960–1990
RU	Guzel	F	40	descendant	1980–1998
RU	Denis	M	37	descendant	1940s
RU	Leonid	M	68	non-migrant	1991–early 2000s
RU	David	M	43	descendant	1920
RU	Elizaveta	F	47	descendant	1941–1945
RU	Kseniia	F	56	descendant	1950
RU	Natal'ia	F	54	descendant	1975
RU	Viktor	M	49	descendant	1954–

research participants, their family experiences date back to the late 1960s, thus covering only part of the communist rule in Poland, but still spanning over 20 years that differed with regard to the opportunity structure for international migration. In both cases, the restrictiveness of the emigration policies in place changed throughout the years, providing differing conditions for international mobility. Although the level of control over emigration under the communist regime was historically unique (Light 2012), emigration from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Polish People's Republic was not non-existent (Pinkus 1983; Stola 2020).

In the early Soviet years, emigration from Russia — both irregular, possible under the general turmoil and fragility of the young state, and regular, based on a series of international agreements on citizenship and exchanges of hostages, prisoners of war, and refugees (Fel'shtinsky 1982; Fel'shtinskii

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1988) — was feasible. The 1922 decree regulating the international travel rules theoretically allowed emigration from Russia, but, in fact, obtaining a permission to leave was not easy — it required submission of a wide range of documents and involved high costs (Moiseenko 2017). By the late 1920s, with the abandonment of the New Economic Policy and introduction of the system of collectivization, further restrictions were placed on departures abroad, making emigration from Russia practically impossible (Fel'shtinsky 1982). There were exceptions, however, for instance, the 1929 semi-forced emigration of Soviet Germans from Moscow (Pinkus 1983). The ban on emigration continued throughout the whole Soviet rule, with the strictest rules in place under Stalin, especially in the 1930s, when, under the highly restrictive border-control system, borders became virtually impermeable and the sheer wish to go abroad became equivalent to treason (Chandler 1998). In the aftermath of World War II, many people took advantage of the post-war chaos or of the bilateral repatriation agreements and left the Soviet Union, but the strict border control measures were still in place after the war. With the beginning of the Cold War, the strict border control regime was expanded to Eastern Europe, which fell under Soviet control, including Poland. The travel abroad restrictions were slightly eased after Stalin's death in 1953, but the basic principles of the Soviet system of migration control established under Stalin were retained under the subsequent leaders (Light 2012). Although under Brezhnev authorities returned to the 1920s policy of expelling political opponents (Light 2012), emigration from the USSR in the post-Stalin years was largely limited to members of a few national minorities with homelands abroad, mainly Soviet Jews, Germans, and Armenians who, following external and internal community efforts, were allowed to emigrate, officially based on the reunification of families and repatriation principles (Heitman 1988, 1994). Their emigration was unprecedented, being the first voluntary and state-sanctioned emigration that happened under the ideology-driven absence of a right to emigration in the USSR (Heitman 1994). Even they, however, used to face substantial obstacles on their way to emigration, and many of them were refused emigration (O'Keefe 1987; Pinkus 1983). Emigration policies concerning these groups were also not constant across the years, being dependent on both international relations and internal regime changes, and interchangeably creating a more favorable and a more hostile environment for emigration (Salitan 1989). At different time periods, other ethnic groups with their homelands abroad (such as Poles, Greeks, and Koreans) were eligible to obtain exit visas (Pinkus 1983). Members of other ethnic groups, including ethnic Russians and titular groups of the RSFSR subdivisions, were virtually deprived of a chance to emigrate. Following Gorbachev's rise to power and the introduction of glasnost and perestroika in the mid-1980s, restrictions on emigration were eased, resulting in a surge of emigrants (Brunarska and Denisenko 2021).

Political regimes of Soviet Russia and of communist Poland and the resultant opportunity structures for international migration differed, with Polish regime being less restrictive but in terms of general trends roughly following the tightening or loosening of the screw ongoing in the Soviet Union (Stola 2020). The Polish passport policy of the mid-1960s was represented by selective restrictiveness (Stola 2001). The late 1960s marked a return to highly restrictive emigration policies, with 93% of applications being rejected in 1970 (Stola 2020). An exception was the abolition of any restrictions on the emigration of Jews to Israel, an inherent element of the March 1968 antisemitic campaign. The 1970s saw liberalization of the passport policy, especially towards temporary stays abroad (which, however, often served as gateways for permanent emigration), and liberalization of currency exchange regulations, which further facilitated labor migration. The year 1980 was a turning point in the proportion of regular vs. irregular migration flows as well as the proportion of departures to socialist countries vs. to the West (Stola 2020). The opportunities for emigration and international travel in general temporarily came to a halt with the introduction of martial law in December 1981, but following its cancellation in 1983, further restrictions on international mobility were lifted, with the liberalization trend continuing until the end of the communist regime (Wnuk 2018). This relaxation of travel rules concerned temporary migration; migration for permanent settlement actually became subject to further restriction in 1982–1987 (Stola 2020). Overall, similar to the USSR, the passport policy of the 1960s to 1980s' Poland limited permanent emigration

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outside the communist bloc to family reunification and was dominated by resettlement regulated by special rules (involving primarily emigration to Germany and Israel). Emigration to the Federal Republic of Germany, previously subject to the most stringent restrictions, was eased by the series of bilateral agreements in the 1970s. Departures within the resultant resettlement actions were, however, subject to limits and hence did not involve all who wished to emigrate.

Repression or non-realization of migration intentions: A blurred boundary

Objective vs. perceived state-imposed obstacles

Cases that can most easily be placed on the involuntary-voluntary immobility continuum involve aspiring migrants who had met objective state-imposed obstacles to emigration — those who had been denied the right to leave their home country by the authorities. These cases represent involuntary immobility in its purest form and involve those who applied for but were not granted their foreign passports or given permission to leave. In their case, the resultant non-migration was wholly driven by the existing "structure"; that is, they have not shown any agency in driving the immobility outcome. These included, for instance, Maria's (F, 68yo, PL, 1981) family, whose chances for getting foreign passports for the already arranged postdoctoral internship of Maria's husband fell through with the introduction of martial law in Poland, and Jan's (M, 51yo, PL, 1980–1986) family, who attempted to resettle to Germany in 1980s based on their German roots and had all the permits from the German side at hand but were denied foreign passports.

Katarzyna's family exemplified a slightly different case — that of family members who had not obtained passports and consequently could not join their family pioneer emigrant abroad. In Katarzyna's case, it was the father who, having faced two unsuccessful emigration attempts in the past, had finally managed to go on a contract with Polservice, a foreign trade enterprise specializing in sending Polish specialists abroad, but decided to return when it turned out that his wife and children would not be able to follow him:

> Father finally managed to leave for X in 1983. He wanted to bring us for the holidays in 1985, everything was ready, we only had to apply for passports. And suddenly it turned out that we cannot get these passports, even though at that time our neighbor was an SB [security service] colonel (…) even though mum tried coming to him, bringing [him] presents, there was no way to sort this out (…) [even] after numerous prompts and all her pleas. (Katarzyna, F, 52yo, PL, 1985)

While it is clear that people who intended to emigrate but were prohibited from going abroad by not having been issued a passport or not having been granted permission to leave should be considered as involuntary non-migrants, the issue is less clear-cut in the case of people who had not faced a direct, formal ban on emigration, but who nevertheless considered themselves banned from going abroad. These cases involve those who perceived their emigration or that of their family members as impossible and had not made any direct, formal efforts towards emigration. This is how Aneta, whose father managed to leave for Austria, described the subsequent decision-making process in her family:

> He went with such awareness that he might stay (…) he wanted to stay but since there was a risk that mum will not get the passport and won't join him with me, he decided to return. (…) He was afraid that if he didn't return, well, simply they will remain separated. (Aneta, F, 44yo, PL, 1977)

Resignation from further migration plans by Katarzyna's and Aneta's fathers may be seen as immobility motivated by the sense of duty/loyalty to their families, an aspect of non-migration decision-making that is well-researched and that Robins (2022) labeled as active immobility, given that it involved actors capable of going (remaining) abroad who exercised some agency in driving their immobility outcome. Remaining separated from their families was, however, not an acceptable

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alternative for them, and hence their immobility cannot be considered as voluntary. Another example of perceived state-imposed obstacles contributing to immobility is Halina's case, who, having already had some experience with the practice of passport issuance in Poland, had not submitted a formal application for a trip to Sweden, assuming that the chances for her and her husband of obtaining foreign passports to be nil:

> I just assumed that they won't give us a passport together, since people simply did not even apply together in those days, if they had no children left here for example, we didn't have any yet at that time, as it was known in advance that maybe they will give it to one person but definitely not to two. (Halina, F, 73yo, PL, 1973)

In Russia, departure from which was considered even less plausible, actions taken towards the realization of one's migration intentions often involved only preparatory steps — for example, the search for information on potential opportunities to go abroad — rather than making an actual attempt to go (for example, by formally applying for departure or passport). The story of Pavel's father, working as an electrician in a tourist resort in Crimea and trying to socialize with visitors from Poland but not taking any formal steps towards leaving, is a good exemplification of migration aspirations repressed due to perceived obstacles:

> [H]e understood that it was impossible to leave then, then no one would have let [him] go, but he looked for chances and hoped that maybe there will be some possibility. Well, in fact, until the end of his life, there was no such opportunity. (Pavel, M, 63yo, RU, 1960–1990)

Similarly, Guzel, representing a titular ethnic group of one of Russia's territorial subdivisions, mentioned the information gathering process as the limit of her family's efforts towards emigration, justifying it with the implausibility of departure abroad at that time:

> Well, what were the [available] steps in those days … He studied, gathered information on countries (…) It has been discussed but it didn't get to … well how to say this, "that's it, we are now putting the house up for sale, we pack our bags and go," it didn't get to [this]. (Guzel, F, 40yo, RU, 1980–)

Since they had not taken any formal steps toward emigration, one may view them as exercising more agency toward immobility than those who formally applied for departure but faced rejection. They thus fall more to the right on the involuntary-voluntary immobility continuum.

Two of my Polish interviewees' accounts concerned situations when people, under pressure, afraid that they would never again see their family members left back in Poland, gave up on emigration, being already at a refugee camp. Iwona, awaiting relocation to Australia in Greece, was pressured to go back by her mother:

> I called home (…) mum started crying, said that dad (…) almost had a heart attack, that he was in a hospital, that what have I done to the family? It was a terribly difficult conversation. And I think that after this conversation, because mum simply wanted me to return, that I abandoned everyone. So (…) she simply pulled me back to the country. (…) And I must say that flying back to Poland, I was crying the whole way through, because I simply knew that it was a very bad decision. (Iwona, F, 57yo, PL, 1985).

Grzegorz, in turn, described how his parents made a decision to emigrate during one of their trips across Europe, but eventually withdrew from it as a result of a protest from one of their children:

> [M]y brother (…) fell into some traumatic mental states, that he will never see [our] grandfather again. He simply started making some projections about it. And you could say that at this camp's gates, and this final decision, as children can act out terrible scenes, he acted

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> out terrible scenes, and my parents then called the grandfather again and decided that in that case, they will return to Poland. (Grzegorz, M, 38yo, PL, 1987)

Iwona's and Grzegorz's cases exemplify how both mobility restrictions and limited possibilities of maintaining contact with relatives remaining on the other side of the border, and the associated pressure could have made people exercise their agency in taking a decision not to migrate. Within a relatively narrow opportunity structure for transnational practices (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995), which was characteristic to the pre-1989/1991 Poland/Russia, such non-migration decisions can be deemed less voluntary than when they are taken under conditions in which developing and maintaining cross-border relations is easier.

Although Iwona and Grzegorz's parents were formally not prohibited from going, their decision to return can hardly be considered as fully voluntary. While their decision not to emigrate may also be regarded — similar to Katarzyna and Aneta's fathers — as immobility motivated by the sense of duty/loyalty to their families, Iwona's and Grzegorz's cases were different in that the pressure in their case came from within the family rather than being directly externally imposed on the family by the state. While the pressure did not come directly from the state (regardless of whether it was from creating objective or perceived obstacles), it was indirectly linked to the restrictions imposed by the state — through the lack of perspectives for travelling freely back to their home country and maintaining regular contact with relatives. Hence, their immobility can be considered not fully voluntary but definitely more skewed towards the voluntary end of the continuum than the immobility of those whose formal applications were refused.

Changes over time in the degree of voluntariness

As shown by my empirical material, the reasons behind the non-realization (or repression) of one's migration intentions — and thus the level of agency/degree of voluntariness — might also have changed throughout the years, along with the changing circumstances. This could have involved both personal and situational circumstances, the latter dependent on a historical context in which people's decision-making took place. In several cases, it happened that people, waiting for an opportunity to leave, abandoned their intentions to emigrate as a result of changing circumstances (for example, when their children were born) — thus moving towards the voluntary pole of the involuntary-voluntary immobility continuum.

My interviewees reported cases where aspiring emigrants made a one-time attempt to leave their home country, where they repeatedly tried to move abroad over the years, and where their emigration intentions came and went throughout the years. One of my Russian interviewees, Viktor, described the decades-long decision-making process of his father, who alternately was deprived of exit from the Soviet Union and abandoned his intentions when the opportunity to leave finally arose:

> [My forebears] believed that Soviet rule would not last long. (…) And they did not leave then after Stalin's death. They were allowed to leave (…) and my father, he was already at that time unfortunately in the army, and he was physically unable to leave. (…) He could go only in the late 1950s. (…) It was very difficult to find work, housing there. (…) And father already, in principle, after the army there in the North, had a good job. Well, how to say this, there was stability, and there was no stability in X. They decided to wait a bit, to save some money. (…) They waited a few more years, that's all, the regime changed again (…) and father again became banned from leaving. (…) In 1972, something changed again, they were allowed to go, and while they were doing the paperwork, I was born. Well, they needed to re-register everything, and with me, they were not allowed to leave permanently. In the 1980s, they began to draw up documents for permanent residence. And there was perestroika, Gorbachev came

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> and all… And then for some reason my father hit the brakes, (…) he did not want to go. "I have a pension," because we had lived in the North all our lives, northern retirement is early. (…) Despite the fact that everything had already been sorted out and we had permission, that is, now we ourselves did not want. (Viktor, M, 49yo, RU, 1954–)

Victor's narrative illustrates how the blurriness of the boundary between voluntary and involuntary immobility concerns not only the presence of the actor's agency (or its lack) at a particular decision moment but also the variability of its presence over time. His father shifted from involuntary towards voluntary non-migrant and back, and ironically, these moves were at odds with the changes in the emigration opportunity structure in the RSFSR, for people with Polish roots wanting to relocate to Poland in particular. Victor's family history serves as a salient illustration of the interplay between everyday times, individual lifetimes, and institutional times, with all these three temporal dimensions intersecting with migration aspirations (Wang and Collins 2020). Viktor's narrative speaks to the connection between spatial aspirations and temporalities (Boccagni 2017). It exemplifies how the trajectory of one's spatial aspirations and shifts along the continuum of voluntariness (cf. the shifts between the immobility categories, Ortiga and Macabasag 2021; Rodriguez-Pena 2023; Schewel 2020) can be dependent on forces external to the actors, and how they can constitute the product of institutional times.

Halina's story, in turn, demonstrates how involuntary non-migrants may (temporarily) abandon their migration intentions in response to state actions:

> In 1969, we decided with my husband (…) to go abroad. (…) And under the pretext that my mum was Jewish, that I'm of Jewish origin, etc., in the wake of these departures after 1968, I thought that I will get a passport. (…) But they didn't give me that passport, I applied three times and I appealed, appealed again (…) they insisted on not letting me go, and they really let many people go, also such with bogus backgrounds, and they were absolutely stubborn with me. Well then no. So, I gave up, because what [else] I was supposed to do. (…) And I was so stubborn that I said to myself then: "I will never ask for a passport again in my life. It's not that you won't give it to me, but I won't ask you again." (Halina, F, 73yo, PL, 1969)

Halina then describes how her second attempt at emigration was prevented by the introduction of martial law in December 1981:

> But then I broke down a little (…) The second time I wanted to leave, well I was very determined, I had two children already and wanted to go to Canada, to emigrate. Well, I have always been incredibly lucky in this respect, because once I decided and was even going to the Canadian Embassy, they introduced martial law. (Halina, F, 73yo, PL, 1981)

Victor and Halina's, and several other accounts of those who (at least temporarily) abandoned their intention to emigrate, show that the observation that the simplistic dichotomy fails to account for the fact that motivations and drivers in the migration decision-making may change over time in response to the changing circumstances applies not only to individuals on the move (Crawley and Skleparis 2018) but also those who stay put.

Discussion

Voluntary and involuntary immobility may be described as extreme cases between which one may locate intermediate situations combining desirability and ability (Mata-Codesal 2015). Similar to Ortiga and Macabasag (2021), this study focuses specifically on situations where initially there were aspirations to emigrate and on the political factors affecting aspiring emigrants' ability to move. Given the former, it thus covers only a small fragment of reality — not accounting for those who had not aspired to emigrate in the first place. Focusing on the non-migration experiences from communist

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Poland and the USSR, in contrast to Ortiga and Macabasag, who examined the repressed migration aspirations of Filipino nurses unable to realize their aspirations due to the narrow opportunity structure in the destination countries, the current study provides an empirical case on the interplay between aspirations and capabilities under emigration rather than immigration restrictions. This also distinguishes it from other studies considering different categories of immobility, which were mostly embedded in contexts of high mobility (Mata-Codesal 2018; Transiskus and Bazarbash 2024).

My participants' accounts show that the category of people whose migration aspirations may be considered to have been repressed by the emigration-restrictive political regime was not uniform with respect to their level of agency in driving the immobility outcome. It included those who faced objective state-imposed obstacles — whose official request received a refusal, and those who did not emigrate due to perceived state-imposed obstacles — those who did not officially apply for departure but were convinced that it would not be feasible, as well as those who managed to go abroad but felt pressured to return. The analysis of reasons for my respondents' family members' intentions having remained unfulfilled provides insights into the nature of the divide between non-realization and repression of migration aspirations, and consequently, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary non-migrants. It demonstrates that the boundary — similar to that between voluntary and forced migration (Bartram 2015; Becker 2022; Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018; Fussell 2012; Ottonelli and Torresi 2013) — is often blurred. What people understand under "not being allowed to emigrate" differs and may include instances allowing for some degree of individual agency. It is natural that, having been faced with objective state-imposed obstacles, some people would abandon their initial intentions, while others would keep struggling (and some of them might eventually manage to overcome the obstacles). This does not mean, however, that the former should be considered voluntary non-migrants — although there was (some) agency and not just structure driving their immobility outcome. In some cases, people's decisions not to fulfill their migration intentions may objectively be seen as voluntary — as theoretically they could have emigrated (but not on their own terms). In their narratives, however, this experience was depicted as repression rather than non-attainment of emigration intentions, so severely was their ability limited in their view. This brings up the logic of "rejected alternatives" (Bartram 2015; Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018; Long 2013; Olsaretti 2004), according to which if rejection of available alternatives (moving not on their terms) is justified, the decision should not be deemed voluntary. If one wishes to visualize the degree of voluntariness of the immobility outcome on a continuum, progressing from low to high, those aspiring emigrants whose immobility was driven by perceived obstacles would be placed to the right of those whose immobility was driven by objective state-imposed obstacles (yet still far from the voluntary end of the continuum).

Moreover, in addition to supporting Robins's (2022) "spectrum approach to immobility" with further empirical examples of non-migrants who can be labeled as neither voluntary nor involuntary, stemming from a different institutional context and by arguing for the need to speak of a continuum of voluntariness, I show how the blurriness of the boundary between voluntary and involuntary immobility concerns not only the presence of an actor's agency at a particular "decision moment" but also the variability of its presence over time. Thus, the observation that the processual character of migration decision-making — consisting of a number of consecutive choices that extend in time, with each single choice being voluntary, involuntary, or mixed — impedes classification of the outcome as either voluntary or forced (Ottonelli and Torresi 2023) can also be related to non-migration. As exemplified by the Polish and Russian non-migrants' family stories, the degree of voluntariness of the immobility outcome might alter considerably throughout the years, along with changing circumstances.

The results of the study corroborate previous findings (Mata-Codesal 2018; Robins 2022; Transiskus and Bazarbash 2024), demonstrating the incompatibility of the involuntary-voluntary dichotomy with the complexity of non-migration. They expand on previous research by highlighting the need to account for differing degrees of (in)voluntariness in arriving at the immobility outcome, which justifies viewing the non-migration decision-making process through the lens of a

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continuum of (in)voluntariness. The postulate of viewing voluntariness of non-migration as a continuum has recently been proposed by Mallick and Hunter (2024) in the context of environmental (non-)migration. While they argue that the level of environmental stress and intergenerational influences affect the voluntariness of the non-migration outcome, their study does not provide empirical examples illustrating the necessity to speak of a continuum of voluntariness instead of a sharp distinction between voluntary and involuntary non-migration. The current study partly fills this gap by demonstrating with empirical examples how state-imposed mobility restrictions interplay with the personal capabilities of aspiring emigrants, leading to a varying degree of voluntariness in the non-migration outcome. By showing the limitations of the involuntary-voluntary distinction in studying immobility, this study adds to the rich literature challenging the conventional binaries in migration studies that could be understood as bounds of a continuum (apart from the voluntary-forced, for example, migration-mobility, see Bitschnau and D'Amato 2023; Piccoli et al. 2024; for legal-illegal, see Biehl 2022).

The study's findings also speak to the recommendation formulated by Transiskus and Bazarbash (2024) regarding the need to explore the transitions between immobility categories (in our case: the shifts on the involuntary-voluntary immobility continuum). By tracking the trajectory of people's migration aspirations against the background of the changes in the restrictiveness of the emigration regime, the historical cases handled in this retrospective study demonstrate that, in studying the (in) voluntariness of immobility, it is advisable to apply a longitudinal perspective. They point to the validity of using this approach not only with regard to environmental but also political changes.

Conclusion

This study on unfulfilled migration intentions under emigration restrictions revealed that the boundary between involuntary and voluntary immobility is often blurred. The analysis of the collected accounts indicates that people who did not emigrate due to perceived state-imposed obstacles should not be considered voluntary non-migrants. At the same time, they exercised less agency towards emigration (hence more agency in driving the immobility outcome) than those whose formal applications were rejected. This suggests a continuum of (in)voluntariness to be a more appropriate way of conceptualizing (in)voluntariness of immobility than the voluntary-involuntary binary. Thereby, the findings provide arguments in favor of measuring voluntariness/forcedness in non-migration decision-making in a continuous rather than dichotomous manner, enabling the capture of a variety of experiences that accompany decisions to move or to stay put, and their differing degree of (in)voluntariness. The study also shows that the decision-maker's position on the continuum may change over time, making the potential classification or assessment of the degree of voluntariness problematic or at least challenging.

While these considerations may seem purely theoretical, they can be instrumental in predicting different social outcomes following the non-migration experience. For example, it remains an open question as to whether the degree of voluntariness of the immobility outcome influences subsequent decisions and perceptions of those who once aspired to emigrate, and consequently their performance in different life spheres. Future studies could investigate the potential influence of the degree of (in)voluntariness of immobility on issues such as labor market performance, investment decisions, or social and political activism of non-migrants. A promising avenue for future research in this respect might be to build an instrument that would quantify the degree of (in)voluntariness of immobility. An inspiration in this regard might be the studies offering measures of perceived forcedness of migration (Niemann and Hertel 2024). Inability to categorize individuals (or families) with unfulfilled migration intentions as either voluntarily or involuntarily immobile due to temporal shifts in the degree of agency in driving the immobility outcome may constitute a challenge in this respect. It points to the need to adopt the temporal lens in studying immobility, looking beyond snapshots of lived experiences of non-migration (cf. Transiskus and Bazarbash 2024; Ortiga and Macabasag 2021).

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Notes

1 This section is slightly revised from the previously published article, drawing data from the same research project (Brunarska 2024).

2 A limitation of the current study is thus that in the case of descendants it relies on indirect accounts of events from a relatively distant past, which makes the results subject to both memory effects (recall bias), when people's memories deviate from reality over time, and to narrative effects, when the intergenerationally narrated events deviate from real events over the course of being narrated. In the case of non-migrants, only the first of the two effects is present, but their memories are more likely to be biased by the post-hoc rationalization of "failure". In both cases, the narrative effect of family stories and memories being conveyed to the researcher overlays these group-specific effects. It could also make a difference when — pre-1989/1991 or post-1989/1991 — past events were narrated to the descendants (see Brunarska 2024).

3 The study was approved by the institutional ethics committee (approval no. CMR/EC/8/2021). Verbal consents were used for practical reasons (remote character of the interviews performed during the COVID-19 pandemic) and to protect the anonymity of participants, which was particularly relevant in relation to Russian interviewees.

4 Five of the Russian interviewees mentioned their Polish roots (here the source of the bias — both with regard to having as well as mentioning foreign roots — might have been the origin and/or affiliation of the researcher, which, on the one hand, might have made individuals with Polish roots more willing to sign up for an interview, and, on the other hand, more likely to spontaneously mention their Polish roots during the interview), one, their ancestors being Jewish, and one, their German-Latvian ancestry. Among the Polish participants, four mentioned having German roots, one, Jewish, and one, Jewish-German roots. This does not mean, however, that all of these interviewees or their ancestors belonged to the mentioned minority groups — usually "roots" concerned one or two of their (interviewees or ancestors) grandparents, making them only partly Polish/German/Jewish. Since no direct questions on ethnic identity or roots were posed during an interview, information on these issues is only fragmentary.

5 Two of the informants were descendants of the same communist-era non-migrant.

6 In two cases, the interviewees were unsure about the exact reasons for their ancestors' intentions remaining unfulfilled, so these cases do not directly inform the results of this study.

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