

Stayers, Leavers, and Returners: Professional Trajectories of Belarusian Mid-Career Academics

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Introduction

For journalists, policymakers, and scholars, Belarus has been interesting first and foremost as a case of “the last true dictatorship in the heart of Europe” or as one of the “worst of the worst” repressive nation-states (Rotberg 2007). In *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (1999), one of the first comprehensive studies of independent Belarus in English, David Marples maintains that:

The press has been systematically silenced; television has become the direct mouthpiece of the president; referenda and elections are ruthlessly manipulated; and society resembles a pyramid with the president at the pinnacle.... The tentacles of the presidency had begun by mid-1997 to reach into every sphere of life. Telephones were frequently tapped, demonstrators were beaten and thrown in jail. Foreigners also found that there were no exemptions from arrest or harassment (Marples 1999, xii).

Marples’s approach fits into a broader pattern in the scholarship: in a whole series of works, the repressive political environment in Belarus has been presented as overwhelming and has been examined with abundant references to the country’s “derailed” historical development and the “weakness” of its national identity, and with close attention to the biography of President Aliaksandar Lukashenka who is in power since 1994 (Marples 1999; Balmaceda, Clem, and Tarlow 2002; Lewis 2002; Korosteleva, Lawson, and Marsh 2003; Goujon 2009; Wilson 2011; Ioffe 2014; Balmaceda 2014). Is Belarus a “proper country” and why has Belarus ended up with Lukashenka (Wilson 2011)? Can Belarus survive as an independent state (Marples 1999)? Are there cultural and geopolitical reasons why Lukashenka has remained at the helm of power? Is his longevity as the national leader of Belarus conditioned only by repression and fear (Ioffe 2014)? What role have energy policies played in the maintenance of Lukashenka’s power in Belarus (Balmaceda 2014)? The research questions vary, but the answers are usually provided by macro-studies of history, economics, and politics, often with a focus on the activities of political elites. Under such an approach, Belarus is understood primarily through the non-democratic nature of its political regime. Little room has been left for human agency.

In summer 2020, Belarus surprised the world with its unexpected and immense anti-government protests when all social groups made a stand against the authoritarian regime. An exceptional role of women and female leaders, an active participation of traditionally loyal pensioners or employees of state enterprises in the protests, strikes, huge social mobilization both

in the center and the peripheries—everything was surprising both for local and international analysts. As all big historical events tend to occur unexpectedly, I do not think that the scale and scope of the 2020 Belarusian protests could have been predicted in some way. However, these events convinced me once again that contemporary Belarusian society remains an under-researched terrain, and various social processes are still waiting to be explored and unpacked.

My study is an attempt to change the perspective under which Belarus is usually studied—it delved deeper into the texture of the social life by exploring the micro-level of personal experiences and how individual agency is limited or boosted by contextual opportunities and constraints. The project examines the careers of Belarusian scholars belonging to a cohort who started their undergraduate education in the early 1990s. Looking back on their professional careers, the scholars were able to reconstruct their personal experiences of main institutionalized transitions like from school to university, from university to graduate school, from graduate school to a stable employment, emigration and return migration to Belarus. Unlike studies which provide extensive descriptions of the tasks performed in particular occupations, this project focuses on the sequence of transitions embedded in various contexts. In other words, instead of looking at a career as a result of individual achievements and characteristics, career lines are studied to discover how certain individual attributes affect career paths and how they are shaped by industry structures and the labor market.

The project strives to contribute to the understanding of the interrelation of the academic periphery with the global centers, the nation-specific opportunity structures in the domain of higher education, as well as individual agency under the authoritarian regime.

Post-1991 Socioeconomic Changes in Belarus

The year of 1991 was a historically significant time when the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and the newly independent state of Belarus launched a series of reforms to transform its institutions. A new law on higher education was adopted, state financial support for higher education was reduced considerably, fees for education were introduced, new educational initiatives (private universities and informal educational platforms) were triggered by relative liberalization at the beginning of the 1990s, and academic mobility became possible. Old departments, especially in the soft sciences, were revised after 1991. For example, philosophy, which in Soviet times, was an ideologically burdened inaccessible field of study, was turned into a living intellectual enterprise, which attracted students without connections but with interest in the discipline itself.

After gaining independence, Belarus, like most countries in the region, private sector in higher education and tuition fees in the public sector. The admissions requirements were less strict for self-financed students and private universities offered reduced tuition in comparison to public ones. Higher education became accessible, and for many Belarusian families it became a “social imperative” (Yudkevich 2017, 135) to provide their children with higher education. The devaluation of a higher education degree, a logical consequence of massification, led to an undergraduate degree being perceived as indispensable for even low-qualified jobs. As a result, applicants in the 1990s believed they needed to get an undergraduate degree at whatever cost without thinking much about the program’s substance, prestige, or career prospects.

Like in many post-Soviet countries, Belarusian authorities started to perceive higher education as an economic sector that could contribute to the development of the national economy and Belarusian universities as a kind of enterprise that could provide educational

services, attract foreign students, and export scientific products (Gille-Belova 2015, 85). The state pushed the universities and research centers to be economically profitable and competitive in the market. This kind of move from full public provision which took place in the USSR to the marketization of higher education is perceived as the biggest change in the landscape of higher education in the region.

One of the most important facts regarding the changes in higher education landscape is the decline in the number of academics from 107,296 in 1990 to 43,472 in 1994. Thousands of people left science to get non-academic jobs or to emigrate. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the state was unable to finance numerous research institutes of the Academy of Sciences in a period of economic depression and rapid change. Many research institutions lost financial support and collapsed, and academics lost most of their privileges and jobs. The immediate consequence of the state's withdrawal from its responsibilities to subsidize the sciences was the decline in wages of those who were employed in academia. Many scientists found themselves living on the edge of starvation. As the restrictions on travel were removed, scientists used this advantage to leave the country because "it is easier to live 'there' on a scholarship than 'here' on a salary" (Nesvetailov 1998, 97).

After the elections of Lukashenka as the President of the country in 1994, the politics moved towards authoritarianism and an administrative mode of economy. Due to the specific system of redistribution, wage control, the monopoly of state property, administered prices, generous social subsidies transferred through the state budget and state-owned enterprises to the entire population, Belarus has the lowest levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality among former USSR republics and very high public spending, particularly on education and health care. However, a large portion of those that do not qualify as poor, have incomes just above the poverty line. The authoritarian and administrative mode of economy stifles private property and businesses and turns the non-entrepreneurial groups of the population into the winners of the regime. As the society is uniformly poor, the level of education and position in the labor market do not make much difference in defining a social class. The university professors have a very modest salary which is even below the country's average monthly wage.

The authorities restored the Soviet-style ideological supervision of science policy and the scientific community. The ideological control was particularly intensified in the early 2000s, the time of color revolutions around the world. Each Belarusian university started to have a vice-rector and each department a vice-dean responsible for managing ideological work, which meant, among other things, monitoring the ideological climate of the unit, developing personnel policy, and taking part in the recruitment process. The rectors started to be appointed or dismissed by the President or by the Minister of Education. A new position of student group overseer was introduced. Students and professors were easily expelled from universities if they happened to participate in oppositional protests, express their political views, or do something that contradicted state ideology.

Theoretical and methodological background

The life course approach was foundational in this study (Elder 1999; 2000; Elder and Shanahan 2006; Heinz and Kruger 2001; Heinz 1996; Mayer 2009). The five principles of the life course theory were applied. The principle of life-span development motivated a long-term perspective for the collection of data. Although the interviews were conducted with each person only once, the questions covered over 25 years of experience, which helped explore events in the

context of individual lives and helped trace the cumulative effect of previous experiences and transitions. The principle of time and place was the reason for a country-based study and a cohort approach. The principle of timing drew attention to the sequence and timing of key transitions. The principle of linked lives inspired the inclusion of questions regarding the occupation of partners as well as the exploration of how family, particularly double-career family situations, influenced the interviewees' professional development. Finally, the principle of agency provided a balanced view on career decision-making within institutional settings and historical contexts.

The project examines the careers of Belarusian scholars belonging to a cohort who started undergraduate education in the early 1990s. The cohort is divided into three subgroups with regard to migration patterns: those who graduated in Belarus and then continued their careers abroad (leavers); those who pursued careers in Belarus (stayers); and those who returned to Belarus after their studies and employment abroad (returnees). In addition, hard and soft disciplines, and male and female gender groups were differentiated. The sample comprises a minimum of five interviews in each subgroup (67 interviews or 110 hours of audio recordings in total). Following a standard development of an academic career, I focused on the interviewees' transitions from the roles of high school students to undergraduate students, from undergraduate students to doctoral students, from doctoral students to doctors, from doctors to professors. Looking at these transitions, I explored key factors which affected their completion as well as similarities and differences between men and women, scholars in soft and hard sciences, and those who left Belarus, returned or never left. Semi-structured interviews help explore the main transitions in the career trajectories and then guarantee the comparability of the data (Locke and Lloyd-Sherlock 2011).

	STAYERS	LEAVERS	RETURNERS	TOTAL
Soft sciences: Women	Economist, Historian, Historian, Philologist, Philologist, Philosopher	Cultural studies researcher, Cultural studies researcher, Historian, Philosopher, Political scientist	Historian, Lawyer, Philologist, Philosopher, Philosopher	17
Soft sciences: Men	Economist, Historian, Philosopher, Philosopher, Philosopher, Sociologist	Cultural studies researcher, Historian, Philologist, Philosopher, Political scientist	Cultural studies researcher, Historian, Historian, Historian, Political scientist, Sociologist, Sociologist	18
Hard sciences: Women	Architect, Chemist, Chemist, Physician, Physicist	Biochemist, Biologist, Biologist, Biologist, Engineer	Biologist, Biologist, Biologist, Physicist, Physicist	15
Hard sciences: Men	Biologist, Chemist, Mathematician, Physician, Physicist	Biologist, Chemist, Engineer, Engineer, Mathematician, Physicist, Physicist	Chemist, Chemist, Engineer Physicist, Physicist	17
Total	23	22	22	67

Figure 1 Sample Matrix

According to the sampling design, the interviewees were expected to have specific characteristics such as belonging to the cohort under study (that is, being of a certain age), completing higher education in Belarus, pursuing an academic career, being engaged in a soft or hard discipline, belonging to the group of stayers, leavers, or returnees, and finally belonging to one of the gender groups. In other words, a participant needed to meet six criteria simultaneously. The participants were found with the help of my own professional network and through extensive online search: LinkedIn, Google Scholar, ResearchGates, websites of Belarusian universities, the database of Belarusian scientists working abroad and the database of the Belarusian State University' alumni.

Key Transitions in Professional Careers

Regarding the transition from a high school student to an undergraduate student, I identified such factors as family social background and financial standing, geographic location in Belarus (Minsk or the provinces), subject preferences, school type, academic performance, chosen destination, participation in school Olympiads. Gender played role as far as certain university specialties were restricted for men only, girls could be dissuaded from certain professions regarded as “not good for women,” boys had to start military service if failed to enter university right after school. With respect to the disciplines, choosing a university specialization was guided predominantly by personal interests in a subject area and a major preference either for soft or hard sciences. In addition to specialized schools and classes which channeled students in certain subject areas, school Olympiads played a great role in stimulating school students’ interest in disciplines. Even though Olympiads were organized in all subject areas, the interviewees in hard sciences reported that Olympiads had utmost importance in their careers because the winners could follow the trodden path of going from a specialized school to the Lyceum of Belarusian State University and then to enter BSU without exams.

The transition from an undergraduate student to a doctoral student was determined by such main factors as family financial standing, pre-university preparation, immersion into studies, type of study programs and teaching staff, job experience during the studies. With reference to gender, according to some female interviewees’ accounts, never later in their careers they experienced such an explicit discrimination as it happened during the doctoral admissions. Belonging to the hard or soft disciplinary clusters made a huge difference in the interviewees’ careers. For students in the hard sciences, it was more common to be involved in undergraduate research which allowed them to socialize in the profession and lay the groundwork for dissertation. In the soft sciences, students rather tended to be engaged in individual intellectual pursuits. Student mobility during the undergraduate period was rare, but some exchange programs existed and provided opportunities to spend a semester or two in Europe. Mobility could inspire students to continue their studies abroad. Additionally, well-established trodden paths brought the students abroad. The interviewees learned about the opportunities regarding foreign master's or PhD programs from their classmates, supervisors, and other academic staff.

The transition from a doctoral student to a doctor was one of the most difficult to complete. The experiences and the outcomes of doctoral studies were different depending on the preparation done before graduate school, straightaway or delayed entering the graduate program, level of autonomy in thesis preparation, family support, formation of own family, mobility and side jobs during the graduate studies, and the defense process. Of course, the experiences were radically different for those who stayed and left. Stayers could capitalize on their networks and interpersonal relationships, the groundwork for a dissertation they laid before entering graduate school, but they were at a distinct disadvantage regarding funding, laboratory facilities, libraries, infrastructure to support the preparation of the dissertation, and the bureaucratized defense process. Leavers could have good financial support for the period of studies and enjoy well equipped laboratories and libraries but needed to adapt themselves to new academic cultures and requirements, use English or other foreign languages to write a thesis, cope with considerable time pressure to finish their PhDs. Female graduate students in Belarus were entitled to a three-year paid maternity leave, while students abroad could not have any possibility to go on leave.

Disciplinary differences lay in the following aspects. In the hard sciences, especially those involving experiments, dissertations were normally written in close collaboration with a

supervisor and a laboratory team. A student's progress was monitored on a regular basis, sometimes even daily. The dissertation was designed in accordance with the theory, methodology, and research topic the team was working on. In contrast, in the soft sciences, students could work individually as soon as the thesis topic and structure were approved. Mobility had a significant effect on dissertation writing. It helped students gain access to the resources that were lacking in Belarus. Students in the hard sciences used overseas laboratories to conduct their experiments, while students in the soft sciences could bring back books and articles that were not accessible in Belarusian libraries and bookstores.

Transition to Professorship: Stayers

Academic mobility was one of the most controversial aspects in the interviewees' professional lives because of the ambiguous attitude towards mobility from the side of university administration, the Ministry of Education, and Higher Attestation Commission. On the one hand, international cooperation is encouraged as an important part of scholarly work and is willingly included in various reports and statistics. On the other hand, Belarusian science is organized in such a way that mobility and interaction with the external world are not really needed. Scholarly publications are expected to be written in local languages and published in local journals, dissertations are evaluated by local experts. International recognition is not a factor that can affect a salary increase or promotion, academic degrees obtained abroad are not recognized in Belarus. For this reason, when a scholar wants to take part in an international conference, summer school, or fellowship program, it is not positively perceived by the administration. Mobile academics are perceived as trouble-makers not only because their classes need to be rescheduled every time they travel abroad but also because the benefits of mobility are not obvious for the administration (unless, of course, a scholar happen to attract a large international grant from a university or a research institute).

However, it would be wrong to conclude that all Belarusian academics are non-mobile. The study showed that it was possible to combine an academic job in Belarus and mobility. For the interviewees who succeeded in that, negotiation with the immediate administration was essential. The head of the department or the director of the institute is in a position to forbid or permit mobility, which is why the interviewees' experience in regard to mobility was different—it depended on the personal and professional values of their bosses.

Due to inbreeding practices and low internal mobility, an academic can remain affiliated with the same university from the beginning of their undergraduate studies until retirement. This was the case for some interviewees who never looked for a full-time job outside their alma mater. The interview data showed that the practices of job searching and hiring were very informal, even though formal regulations exist and are followed in some ways. Openings are not always advertised or are advertised in inaccessible newspapers. As a result, word-of-mouth recommendations or various informal channels are used to get information about the opening. Also, instead of sending a formal application, the interviewees usually fixed an appointment with the head of the department to discuss the existing openings and the possibility of filling them. The key gatekeeper in the process is the head of the department—he or she ultimately decides which candidate to employ.

Yet full-time employment at a university does not guarantee a sufficient income. Most interviewees commented that their remuneration was extremely small and did not reflect their qualifications or job obligations. As was observed, the interviewees followed different

strategies to make a living. Working as associate professors, some received financial support from their parents or partners, some tried to increase the teaching loads at their main place of work, though there was a limit of a 1.5 increase, that is a full time teaching load could only be increased to full-time and a half. The most common option was to look for part-time jobs elsewhere. These could be teaching jobs at other universities or non-academic jobs. Working in the hard sciences was more advantageous as there were more opportunities to receive national and international grants. Some interviewees from the hard sciences said that thanks to grants they were able to increase their income more than three times.

Barbara (philosopher, female, participant #6) said that her husband “sponsored” her passion for work and added that it was quite common for female professors to remain dependent on their husbands:

If to imagine the specificity of our Philosophy Faculty, more often it is a woman with a stable financial support provided by her husband.... A woman is “kinder, kirche, küche” and if you feel like playing a scientific degree game, it is your husband who should pay for the whole thing. If to take those who defend their dissertations here, as a rule, the average would be a young married woman. As a rule, a woman with a child of preschool or primary school age and usually it is a woman whose husband earns pretty much.

Hanna (historian, female, participant #14) supported this view:

I never faced a question of financial survival.... My work never provided me with living, it was never my only source of income, because my husband earned enough, it is his salary that was our source, while I was allowed to pursue my personal interests.

The non-democratic nature of political power in Belarus has its consequences for the academic environment. Academic freedom and autonomy do not exist, the university professors are monitored and are involved in the surveillance of students. Some interviewees said they were interrogated by KGB officers, backlisted, dismissed, or forced to emigrate. The reputation of a politically disloyal employee can not only cost a job but could also prevent a professor from further employment inside the country (“a ban on the profession” as some interviewees called it). Those who want to secure their jobs, practice self-censorship, extreme caution, avoid any kind of oppositional political activism, and try to keep a low profile.

Finally, a puzzle related to a Doctor of Sciences degree in Belarus should be mentioned. After defending a doctoral dissertation and getting a Candidate of Sciences degree the next major career step is to defend a second dissertation to get a Doctor of Sciences degree. Yet the majority of the interviewees said that a Doctor of Sciences degree was not at all in their career plans. The statistics confirmed this tendency showing that only 5.6 per cent of teaching staff was habilitated. Several factors were identified to explain why the scholars felt discouraged about getting a Doctor of Sciences degree. Firstly, habilitation was not needed to secure one’s teaching position. Secondly, the lack of transparency in the Higher Attestation Commission decisions raised serious doubts that the dissertation could be evaluated objectively and thoroughly. Thirdly, the unreasonably high requirements for a habilitation dissertation seemed unrealistic. Fourthly, heavy teaching loads and multiple side jobs the professors usually had did not leave any room for the research work needed for habilitation. That is why university professors stop building their careers as soon as they get a Candidate of Sciences degree.

Transition to Professorship: Leavers

Migration out of Belarus was intense in the 1990s. However, the interviewees were still too young to take part in that emigration wave. Mobility during or after secondary school was mentioned by the interviewees more as an idea than a reality. For example, those who won the republican level school Olympiads, or those who had relatives in Moscow or St. Petersburg, where the best Soviet universities were located, could consider moving out of the country. Migration to the West was not discussed, not only because of the lack of opportunities but also because of the age of the interviewees. They were still too young and, as they themselves admit, unprepared for emigration. Some mobility opportunities opened during undergraduate education—primarily university study tours to neighboring countries (for example, archive visits to Russia and Poland) or independent trips for touristic and academic purposes. Some interviewees participated in formal exchange programs, for example the one which existed between BSU and the Ruhr University and which allowed students to study in Germany for one semester or a year.

As for the graduate stage, studying abroad became a reality for a much larger group of interviewees. The second half of the 1990s until the beginning of the 2000s was the time when the cohort members went abroad for full-time educational master's and PhD programs. While the status of the master's programs was uncertain in Belarus (they were not an obligatory part of education for the cohort), a master's degree abroad was considered both as a way to continue education and as an opportunity to emigrate. Several interviewees said they applied for master's programs in order to leave Belarus because, for example, they wanted to escape military service, political persecution, or because they did not see any career prospects.

A PhD program outside Belarus could be a logical continuation of a master's program which was also finished abroad. Some entered PhD programs abroad immediately after graduating from a university in Belarus, completely bypassing the master's level (if their five-year diploma specialist qualification was recognized as equal to a master's degree). As for graduate students who wrote their dissertations in Belarus, they were not immobile. They traveled abroad to participate in conferences or got scholarships from DAAD. Finally, some interviewees moved abroad with a Candidate of Sciences degree and looked for postdoctoral programs, various fellowships, or long-term employment.

Until the early 2000s, the Internet was still not very well developed in Belarus, so it was not easily to find information on available educational programs and grants abroad. In the interviewees' accounts, the theme of formal or informal "established channels" and well-trodden paths was prominent. Following these paths, which had been paved by previous scholars, was not risky and the interviewees did not need to search for the programs. Rather, they simply took advantage of the opportunities that were available. Some partnership agreements between universities did take place and allowed undergraduate students to study abroad for up to one year, although these were extremely rare. In terms of graduate education, there were also agreements between faculties, and research centers, as well as targeted scholarships which allowed graduates of particular programs to study outside Belarus. There were also the personal contacts of professors, department heads, and supervisors who could send their supervisees to places where collaboration had been established.

Poverty was the main push factor that influenced people to emigrate either to pursue more education or to find employment. Poorly equipped laboratories and low remuneration for graduate students, researchers and university professors, and the need to take multiple side jobs

to earn a living, motivated some interviewees to search for better opportunities abroad. This motivation was particularly strong among those who wanted to pursue an academic career and were disillusioned by the conditions of Belarusian science. In other words, they faced the choice either to quit academia and look for well-paid non-academic employment in Belarus or emigrate and have a chance to remain in academia.

Poverty and bleak career prospects at home contributed to migration pressure in both hard and soft sciences. The latter disciplinary group discussed additional factors that led them to emigrate, namely rejected dissertations and political persecutions. If a dissertation was rejected at one of the stages of the defense process for ideological or other reasons, it could no longer be defended. When that occurred, the scholars who wanted to make a career in academia needed to get a doctoral degree abroad. Some interviewees found opportunities to defend in neighboring Russia and Lithuania without the need to relocate there. Others solved the problem by entering doctoral programs in Europe, leaving Belarus either for the period needed to get a degree or forever.

A postdoc is the next logical career step for scholars who get a PhD degree abroad and want to pursue an academic career. Even though the postdoc should boost a career, open new opportunities and lead to a permanent contract, the interview data showed the opposite—that a postdoctoral position could end a career. Since getting a permanent position was difficult, the interviewees usually just moved from one postdoc to another and in fact, unsuccessful postdoctoral research could jeopardize career plans.

Switching to industry was a common option for natural sciences. Getting a job in a company which develops high-tech products, scholars moved from fundamental to applied science while remaining in the same disciplinary field. The interviewees' experiences showed that this type of transition did not mean a complete break from scholarly work or a devaluation of the academic qualifications they had received. Some private companies offer research-specific positions and remain in close contact with the university environment. In this case, the interviewees said that there was not much difference between university work and work at a company.

Symon (biologist, male, participant#51) found a job in an international pharmacological company. He believed that there was no difference between the academic work at the university and the work that he did for the company:

I do not see any difference. I don't know how to separate the work that I do from what people do at universities. We are engaged in the same science. We have a lot of joint projects. As a part of some of my projects, I collaborate with many universities in Europe. I have to comanage them, the same way a university professor does, while I am here.... We have agreed to publish articles and attend conferences, and this "academic service" also means a lot.

In terms of the soft sciences, a career progression after a doctorate was not so straightforward. The interviewees did not enroll in postdoctoral programs immediately after finishing PhD or did not enroll at all. Instead, they got involved in various activities like teaching, side jobs, project participation, grant applications, workshops and conference organization, writing articles and book preparation. None of the interviewees (with two exceptions) who carved out an academic career outside Belarus got a permanent contract. To remain in academia, they took on temporary contracts and unstable income—precisely what scholars in the hard sciences wanted to avoid by moving to industry.

Transition to Professorship: Returners

Despite the brain drain, high-skilled return migration also takes place. After spending significant time abroad, scholars return to Belarus with new skills and experiences. However, in Belarus, the academic labor market does not give much value to human capital and international networks brought by returners. Those who returned, did not have better salaries (due to the tariff system, they earned the same salaries as the stayers) or more privileged positions. Those who had doctoral degrees awarded abroad needed to receive a recognition from HAC (through nostrification or re-certification). Nostrification is possible only when there is a mutual recognition of academic degrees and titles between Belarus and a foreign state. Such an agreement is signed, for example, between Belarus and Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, China, and Vietnam. But no agreement exists with any country of the European Union, the United States or Canada. Re-certification means re-defending a dissertation.

The interviewees who left Belarus to get a master's or a PhD were usually aware that a foreign degree would not give them any privileges and would actually be negatively perceived at home. When planning their migration, they certainly took this into account. Several interviewees said that when they graduated in the West, they thought about whether they should return to Belarus, but the idea that their diplomas would not be recognized at home stopped them from returning.

In their accounts of the recertification procedure, the interviewees described the process as an absurd experience. Having already defended their dissertations abroad, they needed to defend them for the second time to prove their qualifications. Those who applied for recertification were those who worked at public universities and research centers. They wanted to have their foreign degrees recognized to have the teaching load, allowances and promotions normally available for the holders of a Candidate of Sciences degree. Some returnees with PhDs found jobs outside official academia like at independent research centers, NGOs, or private firms where there was no need to legalize their degree. Some scientists re-emigrated after unsuccessful attempts to reintegrate into the local environment as Belarus was not among the countries which attracted and rewarded returnees.

A recurrent theme in discussing the return migration was returning to Belarus because of job prospects. Some returned to Belarus because they received a job offer. Usually, the salary was less than they could get abroad but the job had a higher status, greater degree of responsibility, was more rooted in the local context and more adjusted to the qualifications of the interviewees. When the interviewees were faced with a choice either to remain in a precarious position abroad or return to Belarus to become the head of the department, laboratory, or a research center, they tended to choose the latter. Some interviewees, especially those with extensive mobility experience, were well acquainted with the realities of Western academia and understood that, having emigrated to the West, they would encounter greater competition, more demanding requirements, and precarious employment. This is how Siarhiey (engineer, male, participant #50) commented on that:

I perfectly understood that if I stayed, my future in Germany...who will I be there, Ausländer? I have seen this enough, and, having lived in Germany, I understand that it's good to visit but not to live there. Here in Belarus there was enough to do, there were enough financial opportunities. Here everything is close, primarily my friends, family, parents. This is to give up everything already in adulthood.... There should have been a strong need for me to break with all this.

An additional motive for many was to live and work in their home country where they could use their native language, be close to their parents and could contribute to the development of the local science. This kind of patriotic sentiment was expressed by scholars in both hard and soft sciences. It can be assumed that the intention to work in Belarus was related to attempts to find a niche in the academic labor market. Working in Belarus and on Belarusian topics, the interviewees faced less severe competition than they did abroad. In other words, patriotism was reinforced by an understanding that abroad, among fierce competition, they would have little chance of securing positions and dealing with “Belarusian” topics. Indeed, interviewees who remained in the West and continued to pursue academic careers changed their research topics to more international ones.

Some argued that the academic profession in Belarus was more secure than it was abroad: contracts were extended almost automatically, and competition was low. Thus, the Belarusian national context with its specific institutional configurations does not seem to follow such global trends as intensification of competition, growing uncertainty of career perspectives, and growing dissatisfaction amongst faculty members.

Conclusion

A dynamic model explaining life course decision making includes macro contexts of history, economy, politics, and national policies; meso context of the national system of higher education, universities, departmental and disciplinary context; micro context of individual biography which encompasses professional relationships and networks, socio-structural achievements and characteristics, and physiological and psychological attributes. The latter is examined through the individual’s sense of self. The description of all these multiples contexts—historical, national, geographical, political, institutional, and the context of linked lives—and multiple factors helped better understand how people exercise their agency, that is the ability of individuals to make choices and pursue their own goals.

However, people’s lives and careers are shaped, not only by external circumstances but also by active and self-reflexive participation of individuals in the construction of their own lives. Elder’s principle of life-span development highlights the importance of path dependency, that is the relevance of the past in determining the present. Early life transitions have a cumulative impact on subsequent transitions. Past events and experiences influence current perceptions, orientations, choices, behaviors, and concerns. To put it differently, there is a biographical logic behind current decisions and choices which individuals make. When confronted with the same set of opportunities and constraints, individuals make different choices. These choices are not simply situational but are based on the person’s history, on the previous career, events and experiences which put a person on a certain track which guides the choices. Agency does not have an absolute freedom but is limited by various contexts which, in any given time and place, provide a set of opportunities and constraints which, due to the past dependency mechanisms, channel individuals onto certain tracks and restrict their choices.

Even though the sample of this study is small, it encompasses the diversity of professional trajectories inside each of twelve small groups. For example, among academics stayers were interviewees in applied and pure sciences, holders of a Doctor of Sciences degree and an undergraduate degree only, those working at the same university throughout their careers and those actively changing their jobs and even having a part-time job in a neighboring country, those whose dissertation was a success and those whose dissertation was rejected by HAC,

those who earn a standard salary and those who earn several times more thanks to research grants and international collaboration, those actively involved in international projects and those who do not speak English, those who ensure ideological control and those who lost their jobs for political reasons. Such a range of experiences helps us better understand the variety of personal meanings and motivations, and contextual opportunities and constraints. And this understanding serves as a guide for investigating a new sample. For example, I believe that the interviewees' employment experiences—informal ways of getting a job, fixed-term contracts, low remuneration for main professional activity, working under ideological control, possibility of being expelled from a job and blacklisted because of political views—can shed light on the conditions of employment for the state employees in Belarus.

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