

# Go west? Emigration intentions of young Bulgarian agricultural specialists

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## ABSTRACT

Western Europe is one of the main destinations for young emigrants coming from Eastern Europe. While most migrants want to move into urban areas, this paper explores in detail the motivational make-up of those targeting international rural destinations. Specifically, we look at the motivation behind the intentions of soon-to-graduate students of agriculture in Bulgaria to move into rural areas in Germany for high-skilled farm work. The formation of migration intentions is depicted along the lines of the Theory of Planned Behavior in a Structural Equation Model. The paper takes a pioneer step in identifying, operationalizing and analyzing the background factors driving the international migration decisions of high-skilled farm specialists. The quantitative survey results highlight general economic motives, such as the desire for better earnings and to avoid unemployment at home, as crucial for the attractiveness of a possible move. With regard to their future career in agriculture, the respondents wished to learn how to run their own farm, take managerial responsibility for a farm, and saw emigration as an opportunity to work with animals. Non-economic aspects such as the desire to escape corruption, or lifestyle considerations were overall not significant, although migration decision-making is influenced by the opinion of the core family. The main perceived barriers for potential migration are a lack of language skills and fear of difficult integration in the host country.

## 1. Introduction

As it is predominantly the vibrant cities that attract high-skilled people, finding well-educated experts has become a challenge for agricultural enterprises in some countries such as Great Britain, Germany or Norway (Lantra, 2010; Lehberger and Hirschauer, 2016; Näther et al., 2013; Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010). Modern farming involves complex tasks and is certainly no business for the non-educated. While even traditional small-scale farming may be seen as a demanding production process, contemporary agriculture requires a broad array of skills ranging from a knowledge of biology and the ability to deal with diverse computerized production facilities to the capacity to manage people and interact with different actors along the supply chain. Until recently, the rural population was the natural pool for recruiting the next generation of farmers. However, both family farms as well as large farm businesses face ever increasing difficulties finding farm successors and recruiting farm specialists. Rural out-migration and a lack of interest among rural youth in careers in the agricultural sector are some of the main contributing factors (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Wiest, 2016).

This study contributes to the literature on skilled labor shortage and international migration intentions. It departs from the dichotomy of

economic and non-economic motives for taking up a skilled job abroad, and in contrast to the overwhelming majority of existing migration studies, it focuses on international relocation *into* the agricultural sector in rural areas, thus offering detailed and rare practice-relevant insights for farm managers and policy makers. Because of its continuously falling share in the gross domestic product of most countries, agriculture is commonly regarded as a sector that absorbs low-skilled seasonal migrants. Up to now it has failed to attract attention from scholars of high-skilled migration. Yet, considering the stable trends in the increasing size of farms, digitalization of production, globalization of competition, volume of rural out-migration and ageing of the rural population, the question of who will manage and work on the modern farms of the future is becoming ever more pressing (Bednaříková et al., 2016). Here, we turn towards the potential contribution of foreign professionals in filling this gap. International imbalances in the supply and demand of skilled farm labor open an untapped migration potential, one whose specific dynamic is not yet well understood.

The literature on migration has extensively dealt with the determinants of the decision to move, but there are only a handful of studies devoted to the specific case of understanding high-skilled international migration to rural destinations and the agricultural sector in particular. Simard (2009) for example, analyzes the motivation of

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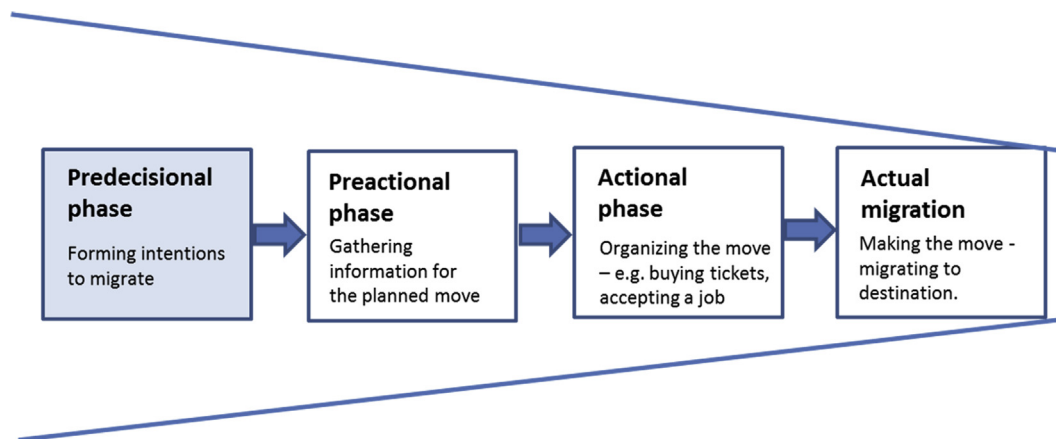


Fig. 1. Migration as a process.

Source: Adapted from Hoppe and Fujishiro (2015).

physicians in rural Canada to prolong their working contracts after the initial contract period is over. She identifies the desire for autonomy and a preference for a rural lifestyle as important determinants, however the opinion of the partner or spouse also plays a decisive role. Nadler et al. (2012) find too that migration into rural areas is linked with a positive view on rurality. Hedberg and Haandrikman (2014) trace the diversity of international immigrants in rural Sweden. They point to a tendency towards short periods of stay. Individuals from post-socialist countries were found in both urban and rural areas, but the study does not reveal their motivation to migrate.

As one of the few examples of studies on farm-oriented rural immigration, Kasimis (2009) focuses on low-skilled agricultural workers in Greece, who come to the country as a cheap labor force from Bulgaria, Romania or Albania, and are usually employed informally in the agricultural sector. He finds that migrants act as a highly flexible labor source and contribute positively to the social fabric in rural regions. Another account of farmer emigration is found in Wolleswinkel and Weersink (2001). They trace the motivation and experience of 24 farming families from the Netherlands who moved to rural Canada. The study covers independent farm entrepreneurs, almost all of them with a secondary school education (pre-university degree, usually 11–12 years of schooling). None of the reviewed studies, however, deals with the emigration motivations of high-skilled farm specialists looking for dependent employment. We thus heed the call of Nadler et al. (2012) for more research on rural migration with particular focus on knowledge-intensive jobs by offering rare insights into the migration intentions of high-skilled agricultural specialists. Another innovation of our paper is that, unlike all other reviewed approaches, we focus on the supply side of potential high-skilled migrants in their home country instead of looking at the destination country. We seek to find the causes that drive young farm specialists from an Eastern European country (Bulgaria) to decide to take up qualified jobs in agriculture in a western European rural area (more specifically in eastern Germany). This question is anything but trivial, considering the multifold alternatives young agricultural specialists face. They could stay at home and work in either the farm or non-farm sector - working outside the field of one's training is not rare in post-socialist labor markets (Taylor et al., 2012). Or, even if migration is on the cards, they may not necessarily choose to move to rural areas as these often lose to the attraction of existing dense diaspora networks in bigger cities, where jobs for partners are also more likely to be found. Our results indicate that the desire to earn money abroad and improve one's farming skills are strong motivational factors. Confidence in one's own foreign language skills coupled with a belief in one's ability to integrate into the host society separate emigration intenders from the non-intenders. The opinion of the family also plays a (minor) role.

The paper continues with an overview of the literature on migration determinants through the prism of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in order to arrive at a theoretical framework with measurable indicators for predicting the rural emigration intentions of farm specialists. The method and sampling are described in Section 2 where we make use of a recent unique quantitative data set collected especially for the purpose of this study. Section 3 presents the results with the identified drivers of emigration intentions. We conclude with a discussion of the results and recommendations for future research.

## 2. Understanding migration intentions: towards a TPB theoretical model

In line with Hoppe and Fujishiro (2015) and Kley (2011), we recognize migration as a complex process, which evolves over time and requires the agency of the individual. This view postulates that migration requires foremost an intention to migrate, followed by planned steps towards realizing this intention. Once the decision has been made, the individual generally explores the possibilities and purposefully gathers relevant information without making any binding commitments. Only after these first steps have been taken can a very concrete and determined pursuit of migration be observed. This involves such measures as making logistical arrangements for the move, buying tickets or accepting a job offer. The process culminates with actual relocation to the destination country (Fig. 1).

Throughout the process, the number of individuals seriously committed to relocating decreases. Their initial dreams and optimism may be tempered by additional information, which places the prospective relocation in a new, less attractive light. Alternatively, migration may also be hindered by unexpected barriers (e.g. the closing of borders, a crisis in the farm sector of the destination country or health problems). Cognitive biases (e.g. over-optimism or pronounced risk aversion), imperfect information, sudden shocks or simply bad luck may also prevent potential migrants from carrying out their initial plans to move.

The process perspective suggests that initial migration intentions are a pre-condition for migration. The size of the pool of potential migrants is decided at this first stage. Intentions have been identified as a reliable predictor of migration behavior and are widely used in the literature as an indicator for potential migration. The causal link between migration intentions and actual migration has been verified in multiple studies (e.g. Bjarnason, 2014; Creighton, 2013; de Groot et al., 2011; De Jong, 2000; Docquier et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 1985; Hoppe and Fujishiro, 2015; Kley and Mulder, 2009; van Dalen and Henkens, 2013). Still, as explained above, this link is not perfect. Some migration studies focus on the situation in the receiving countries after actual migration has occurred, and try to come up with the profile of a typical

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