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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Migration aspirations and migration cultures: A case study of Ukrainian migration towards the European Union

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## Abstract

An abundant body of research focused on macrolevel, mesolevel, and microlevel factors explaining why individuals move across international borders. In this paper, we aim to complement the existing literature by exploring how, within a single country, mesolevel factors differently impact migration aspirations, focusing on a case study of Ukraine. We particularly focus on how migration aspirations of individuals in two different regions can be explained by their international social networks with family members, on the one hand, and with friends, on the other. Furthermore, we explore whether regional migration characteristics play a role, as well as the interaction of such characteristics with individuals' frequency of contact with transnational networks. Our analyses are based on the EUMAGINE project and suggest that the interplay between regional migration characteristics and transnational social contact are key for explaining the decline of migration systems over time.

## KEYWORDS

European Union, migration culture, migration determinants, social networks, Ukraine

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The determinants of international migration are a classical question of interest to migration scholars (e.g., Borjas, 1987; Massey, 1999; Ravenstein, 1885; Sjaastad, 1962). When investigating the causes of international migration, scholars focused on macrofactors (e.g., Borjas, 1989; Todaro, 1969), mesolevel factors (e.g., Boyd & Nowak, 2012; Curran & Rivero-Fuentes, 2003; Faist, 2000; Massey, 1990; Massey et al., 2005; Stark & Taylor, 1991), and individual characteristics such as age, gender, or socio-economic status (e.g., Feliciano, 2005; Sjaastad, 1962). With this article, we contribute to scientific knowledge on the determinants of international migration in two ways. First, we aim to advance current understanding on the interplay between mesolevel factors—social networks—and migration aspirations, by explaining why some people aspire to migrate whereas others do not, despite coming from the same country and having similar background characteristics. We particularly explore how social networks

differently influence migration aspirations within a single country, through a comparison of a region that is heavily impacted by emigration with one characterised by little migration. Second, most research focused on retrospective evaluations of migration determinants, that is, on individuals who already moved abroad. In this paper, our point of departure instead is that international migration necessarily starts with an individual, or individual household, aspiring to move abroad to, for example, improve his or her living conditions. As such, the pre-migration phase encompasses migratory aspirations, which can be defined as “the conviction that migration is desirable” (Carling, 2014, p. 2). These aspirations can be considered as a crucial step towards actual migratory behaviour.

Examining migration aspirations necessarily implies focusing on migrants' country of origin. We hence focus on a case study of Ukrainians' aspirations to move to the European Union (EU), on the basis of unique survey data from the EUMAGINE project ([www.eumagine.org](http://www.eumagine.org)). The choice to focus on Ukraine is informed by recent

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migration statistics showing that Ukraine figures among the top countries of origin of migrants arriving in the EU (Eurostat, 2014; Van Mol & de Valk, 2016), and Ukrainian migration is the largest of all former Soviet Union countries' migration flows towards the EU (Fedyuk & Kindler, 2016). The country has a long tradition of emigration, although until recently, most Ukrainian migrants left for the countries of the former Soviet Union. The move to the West can be considered relatively new. Consequently, research into Ukrainian migration to Europe only recently emerged (e.g., Danzer & Dietz, 2014), and much remains unknown about these migration dynamics.

The central research question we address in this paper is the following: What mesolevel factors explain migration aspirations of Ukrainians and how do they interact with the regional emigration context in which they occur? On the one hand, we investigate the "international social networks" of our respondents, distinguishing between contacts with family and friends abroad. On the other hand, we focus on two different migration regions, namely, a high- and low-migration area.

## 2 | MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

### 2.1 | Determinants of migration aspirations

In sociology, social psychology, and economics, "aspirations express goals or goal-orientations (or desired future end-states) that are relevant to well-being broadly defined" (Bernard, Dercon, Orkin, & Taffese, 2014, p. 5). As goals, they "serve to mobilise and direct energy into action with respect to their objects, thus providing motive power for action" (Haller & Miller, 1963, p. 11, cited in Bernard et al., 2014, p. 5). Consequently, premigration aspirations are a central part of the migration decision-making process (Timmerman, Heyse, & Van Mol, 2011). In this paper, our point of departure is the assumption that migration aspirations are not simply a function of external factors such as natural disasters, political oppression, poverty, wage differentials, or historical formed political, economic, and cultural relations between countries. Although these factors undoubtedly play a role, there is abundant evidence that migration aspirations are also largely dependent on information, perceptions, and value systems (Carling, 2013, 2014; De Haas, 2011, 2014). Whether or not someone develops an aspiration to move abroad partly depends on the information or "images" that he or she receives about potential destination countries, and on his or her perception of the economic and political situation in the sending country. Importantly, migration aspirations are not the same as migration intentions. The latter refer to more concrete plans of people to move abroad and partly depend on one's assessment of the "ability" or "capability" to do so in terms of available resources and legal possibilities (Carling, 2013, 2014; De Haas, 2011). Of course, migration aspirations do not automatically result in migratory intentions and/or behaviour (Cairns & Smyth, 2011). Therefore, migration aspirations should "be treated as a measure of *migration potential* rather than a proxy measure of actual future migration" (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006, p. 291). Thinking of migration as a function of

migration aspirations and capabilities within a given social, economic, and political context thus enables us to link microtheories and macrotheories of migration in a meaningful way. After all, macrolevel factors and developments shape opportunities for migration and simultaneously enable (or constrain) individual migration capabilities (De Haas, 2011). Similarly, Engbersen, Snel, and Esteves (2016) argue that macrolevel situations affect the motivations of potential migrants, who may (or may not) decide to move, which in turn influences macrolevel outcomes such as growing or declining migration flows between countries.

This paper links individual and mesolevel factors to migration aspirations of Ukrainians, with a main focus on the interaction between mesolevel factors and the regional contexts in which they emerge. As Timmerman, Hemmerrechts, and De Clerck (2014, p. 497) argue, migration aspirations are not equal within or across societies and over time. They strongly depend on information, perceptions, and values of individuals. These perceptions become increasingly important today, as more and more people are exposed to migration-related images through the mass media, social media, and cheap travel opportunities. Timmerman, Hemmerrechts, and De Clerck distinguish between three types of perceptions (linked to the macrocontext, mesocontext, and microcontext) that may affect their migration aspirations. At the macrolevel, perceptions and migration aspirations are influenced by factors that are common to all potential migrants in a country such as national migration policies, the overall economic and political situation in a country such as the human rights situation, and images spread by the mass media. Perceptions and migration aspirations are also shaped by microlevel characteristics of individuals such as gender, age, educational attainment, and labour market situation. Migration aspirations are finally also indirectly formed through perceptions affected by mesolevel factors such as international social networks linking potential migrants with family and friends in other countries, as well as the specific location where people live. More specifically, in some locations, migration seems to be a "normal thing to do." In the following paragraphs, we discuss existing scholarship on different levels, in more detail.

### 2.2 | Mesolevel factors

Mesolevel factors in migration research generally refer to the role of migration networks, defined as "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin" (Massey et al., 2005, p. 42). Existing scholarship extensively documented how family and friendship networks, community organisations, and other intermediaries stimulate and facilitate migratory movements (e.g., Boyd & Nowak, 2012; Curran & Rivero-Fuentes, 2003; Faist, 2000; Massey, 1990; Massey et al., 2005; Stark & Taylor, 1991). Garip and Asad (2013) distinguish two types of social support that are relevant for migration (based on DiMaggio & Garip, 2011): *social facilitation* and *normative influence*. The first refers to actual support for migrants, making migration easier and decreasing the costs. The latter points to the influence that previous migrants have on migration aspirations of prospective migrants. This "normative influence" is particularly relevant for this paper. Through all kinds of communication

(personal contacts, visits, letters, emails, social media, etc.), previous migrants influence the perceptions of potential migrants about migration and potential destination countries (Timmerman, De Clerck, Hemmerechts, & Willems, 2014).

In some sending communities, large numbers of out-migration may generate a “culture of migration.” With an increasing number of emigrants, values and cultural perceptions of a local community may change, due to the previously described normative influence (Massey et al., 2005, p. 47). In such communities, migration becomes a normal thing to do, whereas staying at home is perceived as a failure (Massey et al., 2005, p. 47; Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014, p. 44). Moreover, as nonmigrants are constantly confronted with stories about and the symbols of successful migration (luxurious presents, large houses, and “conspicuous consumption” of migrant families), they may develop feelings of “relative deprivation,” stimulating their aspirations to migrate (Stark & Taylor, 1989, 1991). The rise of a culture of migration in sending communities—next to social support in migrant networks and other “feedback mechanisms”—is one of the factors that give migration a self-perpetuating character, often coined by the term “cumulative causation” (Massey, 1990; Massey et al., 2005). Recent migration research, however, also identified “negative feedback mechanisms” that may have a “migration-undermining” effect (De Haas, 2010; Engbersen et al., 2016). For example, returning migrants may talk about unemployment, harsh migration policies, and the sometimes hostile public opinion climate in destination countries, which can discourage potential newcomers to come to Europe. As such, settled migrants may turn from “bridgeheads” to “gateclosers” (Fonseca, Esteves, & McGarricle, 2016; Snel, Engbersen, & Faber, 2016). Recent work of Timmerman, Hemmerechts, and De Clerck (2014) in the Turkish context also hints at the existence of such negative feedback loops. These authors showed that individuals living in high-migration areas have less positive ideas about moving to Europe and are less likely to have migration aspirations compared to individuals living in low-migration areas. Their argument is that negative reports of migrants about moving to and living in Europe are widespread in high-migration areas, whereas they are lacking in low-migration areas. This shows that cultures of migration may also affect migration aspirations negatively.

In sum, migration aspirations may be highly influenced by the social networks of a given individual as well as the migration characteristics of the region where he or she lives in. On the basis of this previous scholarship, two hypotheses can be formulated with regard to the influence of mesolevel factors on migration aspirations. First, we expect that individuals who have more frequent contact with relatives (*Hypothesis 1a*) and friends (*Hypothesis 1b*) abroad are more likely to dispose of migration aspirations. Second, people living in regions with a high number of emigrants are less likely to have migration aspirations, due to “thicker” negative feedback loops (*Hypothesis 2*).

### 2.3 | Microlevel and macrolevel factors

There is ample evidence that individual background characteristics and macrolevel factors impact migration decisions, and henceforth also migration aspirations. As such, it is important to control for possible confounding factors in the analysis.

First, international migration used to be a gender-specific phenomenon in which mainly males participated. Although recent research observes an increasing “feminisation of migration” (Castles et al., 2014), there is still ample evidence that women often have slightly different reasons than do men to migrate (e.g., Timmerman & Hemmerechts, 2015; Timmerman, Martiniello, Rea, & Wets, 2015) or may not be able to migrate because of limited sets of rights and responsibilities (Van Mol, 2017). Second, it is generally expected that the younger strata of the population are more likely to engage in migration movements (e.g., Charles & Denis, 2012; Pekkala, 2003), as they are freer from constraints that tie individuals to the home country (e.g., mortgages, properties, and families). Third, educational attainment and social status may affect someone's migration aspirations as well. It has been widely reported, for example, that migrants are a group that is positively selected in terms of education (Feliciano, 2005; Grogger & Hanson, 2011). Furthermore, in contrast to the popular belief that the poorest people are most likely to migrate, various studies showed that international migrants are usually not drawn from poorer parts of population, as it generally is a costly enterprise (Amit, 2007; Angelucci, 2014; De Haas, 2007). Fourth, household demands such as marital status and parenthood may also influence the timing of migration aspirations and decisions. It has been reported, for example, that single or previously married women have higher risks of migration compared to married women (Kanaiaupuni, 2000). Furthermore, a Swedish study revealed that care responsibilities for children may form a constraint to migration for individuals, particularly when they are at early school age (Fischer & Malmberg, 2001). Consequently, we take marital status and the eventual presence of children into account in our analyses. Finally, migration aspirations are also influenced by macrolevel factors such as natural disasters, poverty, unemployment, and violence or political oppression in the sending countries of migrants (for an overview, see, for example, Castles et al., 2014). Although these factors affect the perceptions and aspirations of all potential migrants in a certain country in more or less the same way, they are unfortunately hard to examine in a single-country case study as ours.

## 3 | THE UKRAINIAN CONTEXT

With almost 6 million Ukrainians living abroad, Ukraine is one of the leading migrant-sending countries worldwide (Duvell, 2007; IOM, 2008; Kubal, 2012; Vollmer, Bilan, Lapshyna, & Vdovtsova, 2010). Today, more than 10% of Ukrainians works abroad, or about one fifth of the total working age population, generally on a temporary basis (Strielkowski & Sanderson, 2013). The large majority of these Ukrainians live in the Russian Federation or one of the other successor states of the former Soviet Union (World Bank, 2010). Since the early 21st century, there is also a continuous inflow of Ukrainian migrants in other countries of the EU. In 2009, for example, Ukraine was ranked fourth among the top countries of origin of newly arrived migrants in the EU, after India, Morocco, and China (Eurostat, 2014). Recent forecasts of Ukrainian migration towards the EU estimate that by 2050, between 1 and 2 million Ukrainians will be living in the EU (Cajka, Jaroszewicz, & Strielkowski, 2014). It is worth noting that the recent

political tensions and military conflicts since 2013 may have a profound effect on Ukrainian migration dynamics, but these have yet to be studied (Fedyuk & Kindler, 2016). It is plausible, for example, that neighbouring EU countries become a destination for Ukrainian asylum seekers (Szulecka, 2016). Recent empirical evidence from Poland indeed suggests an increase in applications for residence permits and refugee status since the escalation of the armed conflict (Brunarska, Kindler, Szulecka, & Toruńczyk-Ruiz, 2016). However, an analysis of the effect of these recent tensions falls beyond the scope of our paper, as our data were collected before these events occurred.

Initially, Ukrainians primarily moved to Southern European countries such as Italy and Portugal. Baganha et al. (2004, p. 27) describe, for example, how Ukrainians all of a sudden became the largest immigrant population in Portugal in the early 2000s. These authors offer three explanations for this sudden mass inflow: the lack of control by other EU member states in granting short-term visa, the ease of movements within the Schengen area, and human trafficking practices by Eastern European “travel agencies” that offered attractive “package deals” to Ukrainians, including travel documents, transportation, and job opportunities (particularly in construction work for the UEFA European Championship in Portugal in 2004). But also Portuguese regularisation programs for irregular migrants in the early 2000s made the country more attractive than other EU countries.

The EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 also brought large Ukrainian communities within the EU territory. Already before the accession, large numbers of Ukrainians lived in countries such as Poland and Hungary. Since 2004, there was a continuous inflow of Ukrainian nationals in the EU—both in the “old” (EU15) and “new” EU countries of 2004 and 2007 (EU12). According to numbers of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Italy, Germany, and to a lesser extent Spain are the main receiving countries for Ukrainians in the EU15 (OECD, 2015). With about 10,000 Ukrainians arriving annually, Poland is the main receiving country among the new member states (Fedyuk & Kindler, 2016; Malynovska, 2006).

Several characteristics of Ukrainian emigration suggest an influence of individual characteristics on migration aspirations. It can be observed, for example, that Ukrainian migration is highly gendered (Dietz, 2010; Fedyuk & Kindler, 2016). In the Czech Republic and Portugal, for example, flows of male migrants predominate, as they mainly work in the agricultural and construction sectors in these countries (Dietz, 2010). Ukrainian migration towards Italy and Slovakia, in contrast, is characterised by a high number of female migrants, who generally work in the care and domestic services sector (Dietz, 2010; Tyldum, 2015). Considering the socio-economic profile of Ukrainian migrants, it has been reported that those with higher education mainly move to Russia instead of the EU (Danzer & Dietz, 2014; Dietz, 2010; Marques & Góis, 2010). Moreover, many Eastern European migrants seem to experience occupational downgrading once they arrived in the EU (Danzer & Dietz, 2014; Heyse, Mahieu, & Timmerman, 2015; Pereira, Snel, & 't Hart, M., 2015). Also for the Ukrainian diaspora, it has been observed they mainly work in low-skilled jobs (IOM, 2008). In Europe, these low-skilled jobs are mainly situated in agricultural, construction, care, and services sectors (Dietz, 2008, 2010; Markov, Ivankova-Stetsyuk, & Seleshchuk, 2009, cited in Strielkowski & Weyskrabova, 2014, p. 34).

Structural factors at the macrolevel, including the labour market situation, however, also influence the size of migration flows from Ukraine. The most prominent emigration motives of Ukrainian migrants seem to be low salaries and a lack of job opportunities in the homeland (Dietz, 2008, 2010). Nevertheless, in certain regions of Ukraine, emigration is more widespread than others. On the country level, about one fifth of the population in working age resides abroad (Duvell, 2007). However, a population survey conducted in the frontier areas of Volyn and Lviv revealed higher numbers; almost half of the respondents had relatives who live abroad (Malynovska, 2006). In Zakarpattia, this number rose to around 70%. Furthermore, Ukrainian migrants appear to “maintain close ties with their family and friends; visit Ukraine very often and invest their earnings in Ukraine” (Markov et al., 2009, cited in Strielkowski & Weyskrabova, 2014, p. 34). This suggests that feedback mechanisms operating through social networks can also be detected in Ukraine, underlining the relevance of the Ukrainian context for studying mesolevel factors influencing migration aspirations. In this paper, we further unravel how these social networks and regional migration characteristics impact on migration aspirations of potential migrants.

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 | Data

Our empirical analysis is based on a unique dataset on migration aspirations, collected in the framework of the EUMAGINE project, funded by the Seventh Framework Programme. The project investigated the influence of perceptions of human rights and democracy on migration aspirations and decisions of Ukrainians in four research areas: (a) Zbaraz, a region with high emigration rates in Western Ukraine; (2) Novovorodolazka, an area in Eastern Ukraine with a specific human rights situation; (3) Znamyanska, area with low emigration rates in Central Ukraine; and (4) Solomyansky rayon/Kyiv, a region including the capital, with an immigration history. In each area, a representative sample of 500 respondents aged 18–39 was drawn, as this population has the highest probability of perceiving emigration as a valuable option. A stratified cluster sample with random walks was used to collect the sample. Within the selected households, respondents were randomly chosen. The selected respondents were questioned face to face with structured paper-and-pencil questionnaires. The data had to be weighted to account for differences in the selection probability of respondents. A selection probability weight was calculated for the within-household selection for each stratum.<sup>1</sup>

In line with the purposes of this paper, we use data from two regions characterised by contrasting migration numbers: Zbaraz (in the Ternopilka region), a high-emigration area, and Znamyanska area (in the Kirovogradka region), a low-emigration region (Vollmer et al., 2010). This implies that we leave out the two other Ukrainians regions that are part of the EUMAGINE project. Both regions are not relevant in view of our focus on the impact of a “contrasting” regional emigration context, more specifically a high- versus low-emigration context, on migration aspirations. The other two regions in the EUMAGINE project, characterised by a specific human rights situation and an



immigration context, are not relevant for the purposes of this paper and therefore not included.

In the Zbaraz area, many seasonal workers leave in order to work abroad. A survey on labour migration in 2008 pointed to 50,400 labour migrants who were working abroad, but still “officially” living in Ternopil villages (Vollmer et al., 2010). Symbolically, the population and local authorities of this region even considered to construct a monument to honour the labour migrants who contributed significantly to the economic welfare of their families and the development of the region. Znamyanska, the low-emigration area, is situated in the north of Kirovogradska region. This region is known for its low-scale emigration. According to Vollmer et al. (2010), migration processes had virtually no influence at all on the development of the population in this region. The transnational networks of respondents in both regions are different given their migration history. Respondents in the Zbaraz region, for example, more often reported to have family abroad (34.3%) compared to those from the Znamyanska region (13.3%; weighted data, based on the sample of 801 respondents). Therefore, a comparative analysis between both regions is relevant for uncovering how transnational social networks and regional characteristics are related to migration aspirations.

## 4.2 | Variables

### 4.2.1 | Dependent variable

Our dependent variable is migration aspirations to Europe, which were measured by two questions. First, the question “Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to go abroad to live or work some time during the next five years, or would you prefer to stay in Ukraine?” On a total of 999 respondents, 460 respondents indicated having migration aspirations (weighted data). Respondents who indicated to have migration aspirations were also asked a second question, namely, to which country they would prefer to go. Subsequently, we restricted our sample of aspiring migrants to respondents who indicated to prefer a European destination country. The combination of these two questions thus resulted in a dichotomous variable that measures the migration aspirations to Europe (0 = *no migration aspirations* [ $n = 534$ ], 1 = *migration aspirations* [ $n = 324$ ]). The 141 respondents not included in our analyses are hence either potential migrants who prefer a non-European destination country ( $n = 125$ ) or respondents with no information on their preferred destination ( $n = 16$ ; weighted data).

### 4.2.2 | Independent variables

As stated previously, we expect transnational contacts of individuals to provide feedback about migration experiences and possible destinations, feeding into migration aspirations. Therefore, the frequencies of transnational contact with family members and friends abroad are considered as crucial variables. Respondents had to indicate how often they had contact (spoken, written, and SMS) with their family and friends abroad over the last 12 months. Importantly, they were explicitly asked to indicate relatives or friends on whose help they could count on if needed, in order to avoid reference to “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973). Furthermore, these family members and friends abroad had to be above 16 years old. In our empirical analyses, we

use the mean frequency of contacts with significant family members and friends abroad, which ranged between never and 365 times.

Second, we are interested in how the broader migration characteristics of the region in which individuals live influence migration aspirations. Therefore, a second dichotomous independent variable indicates the region where respondents live. The region with low emigration numbers is thereby used as the reference category (0 = *Znamyanska*, 1 = *Zbaraz*).

### 4.2.3 | Control variables

As migration aspirations likely vary according to individual background characteristics and general perceptions of the macrosituation in Ukraine and Europe, we have two categories of control variables.

In our analyses, we control for six individual background characteristics on the basis of our literature review. The first is a dichotomous variable indicating gender (0 = *female*, 1 = *male*). The second is a continuous grand-mean-centred variable, indicating age in years (using the mean age in the sample without full listwise deletion = 28.50). Third, respondents' education was measured by a continuous variable, indicating years of education, theoretically ranging from 0 (*no education*) to 23 years. Fourth, we constructed an index measuring the material wealth of respondents using principal component analysis (Cronbach  $\alpha = .76$ , weighted data). Different questions in the survey measured whether respondents had access to a modern flush toilet connected to sewerage in residence, running hot water, shower in residence, radio, satellite dish and receiver, video/VCR/DVD player, computer at home, internet connection at home, washing machine, bicycle, moped/motorcycle, and car/truck/van. Components with an eigenvalue higher than 1 were combined into an index. The explained variance of each component was used to multiply with the regression factor score of the component in question. The multiplied scores were then summed into one index. The data used to construct the material wealth index is the sample without full listwise deletion. The range-standardised scale goes from 0 (*low material wealth*) to 4 (*high material wealth*). Fifth, marital status is included in our analyses as a dichotomous variable (0 = *unmarried/divorced/widowed/separated*, 1 = *married/cohabitation*). Finally, we include a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent has children (0 = *no children*, 1 = *at least one child*).

Next to these individual background characteristics, we included two variables measuring the perception of respondents of the quality of life in both Ukraine and Europe. In five questions, respondents were asked about their opinion about the quality of schools, the quality of life for men and for women, governmental poverty reduction, and health care in Ukraine and Europe. The answer options ranged from *very bad* to *very good* on a 5-point Likert scale. The perception of the quality of life in Europe is coded from 0 (*very bad*) to 4 (*very good*), and the perception of the quality of life in the Ukraine from 0 (*very bad*) to 4 (*very good*). These items were used to construct to composite scales (Cronbach  $\alpha = .78$  for Europe and  $.72$  for Ukraine, weighted data).

## 4.3 | Analytic strategy

Given the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, we conducted a stepwise logistic regression analysis for analysing the impact

of social networks and region of origin on migration aspirations in Ukraine. At the first stage, we introduce frequency of contact with family. At the second stage, we investigate the relationship between frequency of contact with friends. At the third stage, we add the region of origin and the control variables to the model. In the fourth and fifth stages, we investigate the interaction effect between the region of origin and frequency of contact with the transnational family, on the one hand, and with the transnational friendship network, on the other hand. A listwise deletion of missing values results in a sample of 801 respondents. This entails the further exclusion of 57 respondents (weighted data). Before running the analysis, collinearity among variables was tested. The variance inflation factors in the model with all the variables included did not go beyond 2.160, indicating no problems of collinearity.

## 5 | RESULTS

### 5.1 | Descriptive results

In a first analytic step, we investigate the descriptive statistics of our variables, for the total sample and for both regions separately (Table 1).

Regarding our dependent and independent variables, it can be observed that 38.31% of respondents ( $n = 307$ ) had aspirations to migrate to Europe. Furthermore, when looking more closely to the numbers of the two regions, it can be noticed that the share of respondents with migration aspirations was higher in the high-emigration region (Zbaraz, 42.68%) compared to the low-emigration region (Znamyanska, 35.10%;  $\chi^2 = 4.91, p < .05$ ). Next, Table 1 clearly shows that our respondents had more frequent contact with their family networks abroad compared to contact with friends. Significant differences between the two regions can also be detected here. Respondents in Zbaraz have more frequent contact with family ( $t = 6.46, p < .001$ ) and friends ( $t = 2.33, p < .05$ ) compared to respondents in Znamyanska.

With regard to the control variables, Table 1 reveals that 40% of the respondents in the total sample are male. There are no significant differences regarding the gender composition between the two regions. The age profile of respondents from both regions, however, significantly differs ( $t = -4.66, p < .001$ ). The average age of respondents in the sample is 28.76 years, and those from Znamyanska are significantly older compared to the respondents from Zbaraz. Also, regarding the socio-economic background variables, significant differences can be observed. Respondents from Zbaraz studied significantly longer ( $t = 6.24, p < .001$ ) and have lower scores in terms of material wealth ( $t = -7.21, p < .001$ ). Finally, when considering the family characteristics, respondents from the high-emigration region (Zbaraz) are more likely to be unmarried ( $\chi^2 = 5.39, p < .05$ ) and without children ( $\chi^2 = 19.42, p < .001$ ).

We also consider possible differences between the two regions regarding the perceptions of respondents on the quality of life in Ukraine and the EU. Compared to individuals in the high-migration region, respondents in the low-migration region do not have a significantly more positive image on the quality of life in Ukraine ( $t = 1.09, p = .27$ ). However, respondents from the high-migration region dispose of a significantly more positive perception of the quality of life in Europe ( $t = 7.05, p < .001$ ).

### 5.2 | Multivariate results

As a final analytic step, we aim to explain the migration aspirations of respondents in both regions through stepwise logistic regression models. Results are presented in Table 2. Model 1 only includes the mean frequency of contact with family abroad. As expected, there is a significant correlation with migration aspirations. In Model 2, the mean frequency of the respondents' contacts with friends abroad is included. Interestingly, no statistically significant correlation with migration aspirations is observed. Thus, as far as transnational contacts affect migratory aspirations of those left behind, this goes only for contacts with family abroad.

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics of the total sample, Znamyanska, and Zbaraz

	Total sample					Znamyanska					Zbaraz				
	<i>n</i>	Min.	Max.	$\bar{X}/\text{prop.}$	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Min.	Max.	$\bar{X}/\text{prop.}$	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Min.	Max.	$\bar{X}/\text{prop.}$	<i>SD</i>
Dependent variable															
Migration aspirations	801	0	1	38.31	—	462	0	1	35.10	—	339	0	1	42.68	—
Independent variable															
Frequency of contact with family	801	0	365	12.40	45.75	462	0	120	2.36	8.60	339	0	365	26.08	67.28
Frequency of contact with friends	801	0	162	2.30	12.63	462	0	54	1.29	5.32	339	0	162	3.68	18.32
Control variables															
Gender (male)	801	0	1	0.40	—	462	0	1	0.41	—	339	0	1	0.39	—
Age	801	18	39	28.76	6.06	462	18	39	29.61	5.88	339	18	39	27.61	6.12
Years of education	801	8	23	12.78	2.00	462	8	23	12.41	1.88	339	9	20	13.29	2.05
Material wealth	801	0	4	1.53	1.21	462	0	4	1.79	1.24	339	0	4	1.19	1.08
Marital status (unmarried)	801	0	1	0.34	—	462	0	1	0.31	—	339	0	1	0.39	—
Parenthood (no children)	801	0	1	0.35	—	462	0	1	0.29	—	340	0	1	0.44	—
Perception quality of life in Europe	801	1.20	4	2.76	0.46	462	1.20	4	2.67	0.47	339	1.60	4	2.89	0.41
Perception quality of life in Ukraine	801	1	4	2.46	0.52	462	1	4	2.44	0.52	339	1.20	4	2.48	0.52

Source. EUMAGINE project, weighted data.

**TABLE 2** Logistic regression on European migration aspirations (odds ratios, reference category = no migration aspirations)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Family contact ( <i>n</i> = 801)	Contact with friends ( <i>n</i> = 801)	Region ( <i>n</i> = 801)	Region × Family ( <i>n</i> = 801)	Region × Friends ( <i>n</i> = 801)
Constant	0.566***	0.617***	0.671	0.624	0.651
Independent variables					
Frequency of contact with family	1.008***		1.007***	1.030**	1.007***
Frequency of contact with friends		1.003	1.000	0.999	1.012
Region type (ref: Znamyanska)			1.015	1.094	1.042
Control variables					
Gender (ref: female)			1.320*	1.317*	1.316*
Age			0.981	0.982	0.981
Years of education			0.994	0.990	0.994
Material wealth			0.970	0.973	0.972
Marital status (ref: unmarried)			0.826	0.827	0.828
Parenthood (ref: no children)			0.890	0.887	0.898
Perception quality of life in Europe			1.374*	1.401*	1.372*
Perception quality of life in Ukraine			0.579***	0.586***	0.582***
Interaction terms					
Region × Frequency of contact with family				0.977*	
Region × Frequency of contact with friends					0.986
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.032	.000	.081	.087	.082

Source. EUMAGINE project.

Note.

\*\*\**p* < .01.

\*\**p* < .05.

\**p* < .10; weighted data and *n*.

Model 3 presents the full model, including control variables and the region that respondents live in. Controlling for confounding factors, this model confirms the significant relationship between frequency of contact with family members abroad and migration aspirations for our sample. Once again, the relationship between frequency of contact with transnational friendship networks is proven to be nonsignificant. Remarkably, no significant differences between both regions are detected when controlling for other factors. Although our descriptive analysis revealed higher percentages of migration aspirations in the high-emigration region (Zbaraz) compared to the low-emigration region (Znamyanska), it seems that this difference can be explained by the intensity of transnational family contacts and a negative perception of the quality of life in Ukraine.

In the last step, we investigated two interaction terms, more specifically, between the region of origin and frequency of contact with the transnational family network (Model 4) and with the transnational friendship network (Model 5). Both interaction effects were not statistically significant. Nevertheless, the coefficients also indicate that in regions characterised by a high number of emigrants (in our case Zbaraz), having more frequent contact with family members in Europe slightly decreases the likelihood of having migration aspirations to Europe.

As an additional robustness check, we also estimated models for the regions separately (see Tables 3a and 3b). These results are largely in line with the findings of the pooled model discussed above; namely, that in our sample the frequency of contact with family members abroad is significantly correlated with migration aspirations, and this

relationship seems to be somewhat more pronounced in the Znamyanska region, characterised by a low number of emigrants.

## 6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we aimed to investigate what mesolevel factors that influence migration aspirations, focusing on a case study of Ukraine. Two hypotheses were formulated on the role of social networks and the characteristics of sending communities. First, we expected that respondents with more frequent contact with relatives and friends abroad are more likely to have migration aspirations. Second, we postulated that in sending regions characterised by high numbers of emigrants, respondents are less likely to have migration aspirations due to the existence of negative feedback loops. Our results only partially confirm both hypotheses.

First, the analysis revealed that in our sample, those individuals who have more frequent contact with family members abroad are more likely to have migration aspirations. The same correlation was not detected, however, for frequency of contact with friends. This might be related to the changing composition of networks of migrants over time. It has been widely demonstrated, for example, that over time, contacts with the home-country decrease (e.g., Hedberg & Kepsu, 2008; Levrau, Piqueray, Goddeeris, & Timmerman, 2014); and this holds particularly true for contacts with extended family and dispersed friendships (Eve, 2008; Mollenhorst, Volker, & Flap, 2014; Viry, 2012). After all, maintaining relations requires a considerable effort



**TABLE 3A** Logistic regression of European migration aspirations in Zbaraz (odds ratios, reference category = no migration aspirations)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Family contact	Contact with friends	Full model
Constant	0.635***	0.747***	2.708
Independent variables			
Frequency of contact with family	1.006***		1.006***
Frequency of contact with friends		0.999	0.998
Control variables			
Gender (ref: female)			1.154
Age			0.990
Years of education			0.945
Material wealth			0.897
Marital status (ref: unmarried)			0.666
Parenthood (ref: no children)			0.738
Perception quality of life in Europe			1.176
Perception quality of life in Ukraine			0.641*
Nagelkerke $R^2$	.049	.000	.102

Source. EUMAGINE project.

Note.

\*\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\* $p < .05$ .

\* $p < .10$ ; weighted data and  $n$ .

**TABLE 3B** Logistic regression of European migration aspirations in Znamyanska (odds ratios, reference category = no migration aspirations)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Family contact	Contact with friends	Full model
Constant	0.501***	0.523***	0.212
Independent variables			
Frequency of contact with family	1.032**		1.029**
Frequency of contact with friends		1.025	1.010
Control variables			
Gender (ref: female)			1.453*
Age			0.983
Years of education			1.036
Material wealth			1.027
Marital status (ref: unmarried)			0.967
Parenthood (ref: no children)			1.039
Perception quality of life in Europe			1.525*
Perception quality of life in Ukraine			0.551***
Nagelkerke $R^2$	.020	.006	.080

Source. EUMAGINE project.

Note.

\*\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\* $p < .05$ .

\* $p < .10$ ; weighted data and  $n$ .

and time (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014), and “migrants’ physical absence hampers such maintenance, leading to a progressive decrease in contact frequency” (Koelet, Van Mol, & De Valk, 2017, p. 454). Furthermore, “the combination of the obligation to help kin, and the high level of structural embeddedness means that kin are both cognitively and time-wise less demanding relationships to maintain than non-kin relationships” (Roberts, Dunbar, Pollet, & Kuppens, 2009, p. 139). From

this perspective, international family networks are logically most strongly related to migration aspirations.

Second, our analysis shows that for our sample, in principle, no statistically significant differences can be detected in terms of migration aspirations between people living in low- and high-migration regions. Interestingly, however, our analysis suggests that in high-emigration regions, compared to low-emigration regions, a higher

frequency of contact with family members abroad is less strongly correlated with migration aspirations. Once again, this does not hold true for frequency of contact with friends abroad, which might be related to the fact that transnational friendship connections generally decrease over time, as well as by the lower level of structural embeddedness of nonkin relationships. Negative migration stories of close relatives abroad, in contrast, thus seem to have a higher potential for curbing migration aspirations in regions characterised by a culture of migration. The mechanism behind this relationship, however, remains to be uncovered by future research. It might be possible, for example, that in high-migration regions, migration is omnipresent in stories of friends and relatives living nearby as well, leading to a cumulative effect of negative feedback. Potential migrants might thus be more regularly confronted with negative stories in their wider social circles and, hence, dispose of a more complete set of information on the disadvantages of migration. These findings are in line with a comparison made of migration aspirations between high- and low-emigration areas in Turkey, demonstrating that perceptions on Europe were significantly more negative in the high- compared to low-emigration region (Timmerman, Hemmerichs, & De Clerck, 2014). The family feedback mechanism may then constitute a “turning point,” adding negative information from a well-trusted source and, hence, lowering their migration aspirations. In low-migration regions, such cumulative effect might be absent, as there might be only a single feedback loop within the proper family instead of multiple feedback loops within the wider community. This might explain why migration aspirations are not as heavily affected. In particular, qualitative research in home communities might have the potential to uncover the mechanisms behind this relationship.

Finally, some limitations of our study should be mentioned. First, our data do not allow for any causal interpretations, as it is based on cross-sectional data. Future studies could benefit from a longitudinal perspective, allowing to track changes over time. Such approach would allow to disentangle more precisely the relationship between increasing emigration numbers, transnational social contacts, and migration aspirations. Second, the explained variance of our models remained rather low, suggesting there are other factors at play that are not captured by our study. It is plausible, for example, that the variation in migration aspirations is explained by personality characteristics. It has been shown, for example, that compared to the local population, migrants have different attachment styles (Polek, Van Oudenhoven, & Berge, 2011), higher achievement and power motivation, and lower affiliation motivation and family centrality (Boneva & Frieze, 2001). Future research could try to build more inclusive models, incorporating psychological characteristics as well. Third, the data on which our analyses are based were collected before the start of the Ukrainian conflict. Given the changed geo-political situation and the enduring conflict, it is not unlikely migration aspirations and the number of people who are willing to migrate significantly changed. Furthermore, it is also plausible that the main motivations for migration changed due to the conflict, particularly for individuals and families living in the conflict zone.

In conclusion, in this paper, we highlighted the importance of transnational family ties in the migration decision-making process among Ukrainian individuals. The family remains at the core of the migration process and has the potential to stimulate and curb existing migration dynamics. In particular, this last point is interesting, as it suggests that

the cumulative effect of migration can reach a certain threshold. From the moment onwards when migration in a community reaches its saturation, feedback mechanisms from family members abroad play an important role in the stagnation and decay of out-migration over time.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also Ersanilli (2012).

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