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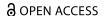# Oscillating Between Hope and Despair: Understanding Migrants' Reflections on Ambivalence in 'Transit'

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Oscillating Between Hope and Despair: Understanding Migrants' Reflections on Ambivalence in 'Transit'

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the under-explored question of how migrants in so-called 'transit countries' make sense of migration aspirations. Drawing from recent scholarship on migration-related ambivalence, we focus on how people reflect on the past and present of their migration aspirations, employing a migrant-centered approach. Based on semi-structured interviews with refugees in Libya and Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as complementary expert interviews, we find that ambivalence, which (re-)shapes migration aspirations, is a necessary reaction to the structures of uncertainty installed in current European externalization measures beyond EU borders. By adopting a migrant-centered approach and taking into account the multidimensional and processual nature of ambivalence, our research contributes to a better understanding of migrants as self-critical and reflective actors facing the challenges of making decisions in situations of uncertainty; thus, ambivalence is produced in a dialectic interplay between migrants' agency and the opportunities/limitations of changing structures that surround them which, in turn, informs the interplay between forward and backward migration aspirations.

1. Introduction

"Hotspots", "information centers", camps, reception centers, and other structures of migration governance and, in response, the clandestine migration industry (Andersson, 2014) are topical buzzwords in the Mediterranean, which has become home to three major migratory routes in Europe, namely the Eastern, Central, and Western Mediterranean routes. From an EU policy-maker perspective, "transit country" is a particularly important term because it describes migrants'[1] whereabouts and pathways before arriving at EU external borders.

However, migration scholarship has become increasingly critical of the concept of "transit country", considering it more as a policy intervention to focus on regions where externalization measures are particularly important for preventing people from arriving in the EU (Düvell, 2012). Indeed, it is argued that for migrants "transit countries" are accompanied by experiences of "stuckedness" in response to the EU migration policies and regulations put in place by policymakers (Khan, 2013; Ramadan, 2013). "Transit" is thus considered an overly simplified concept in relation to everyday migration experiences, imposed by policymakers on local contexts and migrants' lives (Sampson et al., 2016).

Narratives about migration during Europe's "migration crisis" are still often represented as straightforward and uninterrupted which Crawley and Jones (2021, p. 3227) describe as "a view from Europe". However, so far, people's own experiences, reflections, and decisions of migration in "transit contexts" have received insufficient attention. Therefore, to understand "the intimacies of transit in relation to "stuckedness" (Missbach, 2014, p. 286), this paper responds to demands for a migrant-centered perspective as a necessary approach to counter the dominant notion of "transit" as a "passage to Europe" (Yıldız, 2021) by connecting people's own experiences to the structures of control and uncertainty in contexts, declared and regulated as "transit countries".

As migrants adapt their aspirations to their changing circumstances, the ways they reflect on their migration experience are likely to adapt as well. However, there is currently a lack of focus on migrants as reflective actors. To address this gap in the literature, we ask: *In which ways do migrants make sense of their migration decisions in 'transit contexts'?* To answer this question, we argue that migrants' reflections about their experiences are unavoidably directed to their situations of uncertainty, which forces people to respond to ambivalence. Proposing a conceptualization of ambivalence for the study of migration experiences, we follow understandings of ambivalence that view it as a persistent process that individuals can employ to tackle experiences that are confusing or complex, and thus, simultaneously, result in contrary responses (Boccagni & Kivisto, 2019; Hillcoat-Nallétamby & Phillips, 2011). In other words, we argue that the analysis of migration experiences needs to accommodate (responses to) ambivalence in people's sense-making. Since "transit contexts" are often governed in ways that hinder people from freely choosing to stay or to leave (e.g., due to limitations regarding labor market participation, legal status, and externalized border controls) (Düvell, 2012), we consider ambivalence as a crucial self-reflection process for migrants by "looking back" and "looking forward" to make sense of their lives in so-called "transit countries". More explicitly, our research is motivated by understanding the role of ambivalence in (re-)shaping migrants' aspirations, expectations, and behaviors over the course of their migration journey. In this context, we understand sense-making to constitute a highly ambivalent process, highlighting migrants' voices that speak of a mix between self-reflexivity, self-criticism, weighing options to migrate or not, rational decision-making, subjectivity, and intuition. Thus, what policymakers tend to consider as "naïve" attitudes among migrants or lack of knowledge at first is, in fact, much better understood as a coping mechanism in response to uncertain, complicated, and precarious circumstances (Tazreiter, 2019) and not as people's uncertainty as such.

So far, ambivalence is often investigated in relation to migrants' feelings toward their country of origin (e.g., Belloni, 2019; Kivisto & La Vecchia-Mikkola 2013; Petra, 2021) or regarding integration (e.g., Vathi & King 2013). Yet, ambivalence also plays an important role in the ways in which people make sense of their past, present, and future migration aspirations in the context of transit. Based on the account that "ambivalence provides evidence of a healthy level of self-reflexivity in the actions of temporary migrants" (Tazreiter, 2019, p. 96), we find that ambivalence is produced in a "dialectic" interplay between migrants' agency and the opportunities/limitations of changing structures that surround them.

For our analysis, we draw from 53 semi-structured interviews with migrants in Libya as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), complemented with expert interviews in the field of migration, generated in the H2020 MIRROR project. The way ambivalence unfolds among migrants, as this study indicates, is expressed as not recommending others to take the same journey as they did, focusing on particularly two themes: the risks of irregular migration as well as the uncertain present situation and future by analyzing migrants' self-evaluations about whether their decision to migrate was "the right choice". Doing so, our analysis provides detailed insights into migration aspirations as well as reflections on original migration aspirations which are highly individual, complex, and subjective processes that question understandings of migration as linear (Crawley & Jones, 2021).

2. Migrants' ambivalence and aspirations in the context of "Transit"

Evidence suggests that destination goals are made and remade throughout migration processes (Düvell, 2012; Pécoud, 2015). According to Düvell (2012, p. 422), "transit movements constantly change paths, points of departure and arrival; frequently, migrants respond to new opportunities or new or increasing control policies or are blown off course." Therefore, it is possible that today's transit country for migrants may become tomorrow's destination country or vice versa. In this regard, we need to pay special attention to the reciprocal relationship between fragmented journeys of people on the move and their experiences when "stuck in transit", a link that has often been overlooked in migration studies (Syed Zwick, 2022). Assumptions that migration processes "have fixed starting and endpoints and clear, stable intentions" (Fine, 2018, p. 1746) have been criticized by migration scholars. Yet, despite evidence of a more complex picture, dominant migration policy discourses still center around migrants' misinformation or lack of information (Vammen et al., 2021), with actors of migration governance engaged in reinforcing policy discourses of irregular migration, for example, *via* information campaigns (Brändle, 2022).

In this research, we, therefore, focus on the connections between original migration aspirations and past/current structural and situational restraints and/or opportunities from migrants' own perspectives and how they make sense of this connection. We employ the concept of ambivalence to understand this connection. Ambivalence, for the purpose of this paper, should most generally be understood as "the ongoing transactional processes in which social actors are constantly engaged" (Hillcoat-Nallétamby & Phillips, 2011, p. 206) over the course of the migration journey. More specifically, we understand ambivalence as an "interpretive tool in sociology [that] refers to the social experience of any complex, cognitively confusing, or emotionally charged phenomenon that calls simultaneously for opposite reactions" (Boccagni & Kivisto, 2019).

Zooming out, however, there is substantial discussion across fields regarding the nature of ambivalence. Psychological studies traditionally explore ambivalence as subjective contradictions evident in emotions, motivations, and cognitions at the individual level. In contrast, sociologists investigate ambivalence concerning human relationships and social institutions at the structural level, focusing on conflicting normative expectations within institutional frameworks such as statuses, roles, and norms (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Over the last two decades, family studies have emphasized the multidimensionality of ambivalence, combining both psychological and sociological dimensions, which manifest in social interactions (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). In this regard, Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips (2011) define ambivalence as a sociological construct situated at the intersection of individual, group (network), and social structural influences, requiring continuous negotiation and (re-) evaluation over the life course (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Ultimately, ambivalence is characterized by transitive, temporal, and transformative aspects (Hillcoat-Nallétamby & Phillips, 2011).

Although there has been longstanding research on ambivalence in sociological and psychological studies, the development of ambivalence as a conceptual tool in migration studies has only recently received increasing attention (McIlwaine & Bermudez, 2015; McNevin, 2013; Tazreiter, 2019). Migration scholarship predominantly investigates ambivalence in two ways. First, border and critical refugee studies highlight the role of different forms and/or strategies of ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty in migration governance particularly in the governance of displaced people (Stel, 2021). Political geographers, for instance, use concepts such as ambivalence, ambiguity, and uncertainty to describe the governance of forced migration (Oesch, 2017), arguing that forced migrants encounter "an unpredictable, hybrid form of governance that emerges at the continuously shifting interface between formal and informal forms of regulation" and hence produces institutional ambiguity (Nassar & Stel, 2019, p. 44). Second, some scholars investigate ambivalence through migrant experiences considering not only their feelings, emotions, and attitudes, but also their agency which can operate as a response mechanism to "life's risks and uncertainties" that are faced during the migration journey (Tazreiter,

2019, p. 95). In theorizing ambivalence, Horst and Grabska's (2015) approach to the notion of uncertainty, which routinely contributes to displaced populations' lived experiences, thus deserves special attention here. Uncertainty should not be associated with only waiting, violence, and risk, but also refers to hope, coping, actions, and responses, an active and reflective process. With both temporal and spatial realities feeding into uncertainty, it is necessary to distinguish between two types of uncertainty: radical uncertainty and protracted uncertainty. The former refers to intense unpredictability during the initial stages of conflict situations marked by a scarcity of reliable information about what is happening owing to rapid changes whereas the latter involves growing predictability about the present as displacement persists, yet a substantial sense of unpredictability lingers about the future (Horst & Grabska, 2015). Yet, it is essential to acknowledge the interplay between these uncertainties, as migrants often contend with uncertainty imposed by actors of migration governance who seek to impede migrants' mobility, adding another layer to the uncertainties migrants navigate through their ambivalence. Therefore, it is crucial to understand what factors contribute to ambivalence as noted by Boccagni and Kivisto (2019, p. 5):

> […] instead of seeking a sociological version of ambivalence, the task for sociologists is to examine factors built into the social structure—particularly statuses and roles—that are conducive to generating ambivalence as a state of mind as well as identifying those statuses and roles that are less likely to trigger ambivalence.

Acknowledging these different approaches to ambivalence and calls to reconceptualize it, this article draws attention to the *multidimensional* and *processual* nature of ambivalence in the various stages of migration.

People's everyday experiences in "transit" are complex and shaped by contradictions between migration aspirations (i.e., wishing to migrate) and their structural abilities (individuals' ability to realize their migration aspirations) (Carling & Schewel, 2018). On the one hand, migration aspirations are considered "forwardoriented" (Triandafyllidou, 2022), or have been described as a cognitive process of "pre-experiencing futures" (Koikkalainen et al., 2020). On the other hand, "transit countries" require migrants to cope with a "forced temporariness" (Triandafyllidou, 2022). Recent studies suggest that emotions (cultural perceptions) and temporal effects (living in another country over an extended period of time) play a crucial role in understanding migration decisions in the context of forced temporariness (Rottmann & Kaya, 2021). The policy/structural system of "transit" is characterized by temporary, limited, or non-existent protection schemes. In particular, transit countries have become notorious places of "stuckedness" (Khan, 2013; Missbach, 2014), in which migrants go through highly complex situations, described as "neither here nor there" (Mountz, 2011, p. 383) and as a "time-space of between" (Ramadan, 2013, p. 73). In such situations, sense-making requires ambivalence as a coping mechanism with this paradox. As Tazreiter (2019) argues, while other notions, such as that of "home", are widely accepted as an idea to which people relate in ambivalent ways, migrants' ambivalence in "transit" is often misjudged as naivete, irrationality, or disinterest. Ambivalence, then, is in fact a "predictable, rational response" to the highly complex and uncertain situation and experience of "stuckedness" in transit (Tazreiter, 2019, p. 95).

"Transit" may, therefore, rather be understood as a transition period, in which people are, in fact, unable to continue as anticipated—"stuck"—requiring them to reflect on their migration experiences and to (re-)consider and/or develop a sense of belonging in a new (temporary or permanent) country, while having to adapt their original migration aspirations and, thus, cope with their current migration experiences (Sampson et al., 2016). In other words, "transit" describes a situation and human experience in which (what we will refer to as) *backward* and *forward aspirations* interact and are critically reflected upon. We use *forward migration* aspirations to refer to individuals' wishes to migrate in the first place (i.e., the country of "origin" context) and migrate further during a transition period (i.e., "transit" country context) whereas *backward migration aspirations* should be understood as resulting from the interruption of forward migration aspirations over the course of the migration journey. This interruption, hindering the

realization of previously set goals to pursue a better life, may take the shape of external challenges, obstacles, unforeseen events, or personal setbacks. Forward migration aspirations being interrupted leads to a revision of original migration aspirations by engaging with a self-reflection process through which migrants reevaluate their migration decisions by self-questioning whether it is worth eaving it all behind by migrating and whether staying or returning actually benefits their overall well-being in the long term.

Understanding the mobilization of backward aspirations is crucial for several reasons. First, when migrants encounter obstacles that interrupt their forward migration aspirations, they are forced to revisit their original migration aspirations. This self-reflection process involves (re) assessing if migrating and leaving everything behind is worthwhile and whether staying put or returning would benefit their overall well-being in the long term. This self-reflection process provides valuable insights into migrants' motivations and decision-making processes. Second, migrants continuously adapt to temporal and transitive circumstances in transit contexts by mobilizing their original, forward, and backward migration aspirations. They do so by drawing upon their initial desires to migrate forward, as well as their aspirations that may have been thwarted over the course of the migration journey. Studying how migrants activate their backward aspirations in response to the interruption of their forward aspirations allows us to develop a deeper understanding of how they navigate and cope with challenges during their migration journey which gives a clue to their adaptive strategies and resilience in the face of adversity. Third, zooming in on backward aspirations provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of migration experiences, the challenges they face, the decisions they make, and the strategies they employ to achieve their goals.

Importantly, in doing so we also highlight that "destination", contrary to policy discourses, might not be the dominant notion among migrants. This way, we can also move away from the tendency to approach "irregular" migration as characterized by push and pull factors. Instead, people's experiences and contextual situations evidently require a high degree of ambivalence, which facilitates a range of accommodating emotions such as adaptation, acceptance, and, in some cases, resignation, all of which alleviate conflicting and burdensome interchanges between often oscillating states of hope and despair (Tazreiter, 2019). Most of all, "in transit" people are forced to accept that "destination" is a changing and dynamic notion that can manifest through interactions.

We argue that this situation leads migrants to oscillate between "hope" and "despair" as their migration aspirations are "stranded" in the current context of their fragmented journeys. This ambivalence, though often misunderstood as disinterest, shows to be a coping strategy to navigate through these ups and downs. By investigating the ways in which migrants make sense of their original migration aspirations in situations of "stuckedness", we also draw attention to how their ambivalence in "transit" interacts with the interplay between *forward* and *backward aspirations* in a given situational context.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research settings

Although our intention is not to offer a systematic comparison here, we focus on two "transit countries": Libya and BiH. Combining interviews in more than one "transit country", i.e., as a multiple-case study (Yin, 2011), increases the validity of our interview analysis because it helps to contextualize and better understand sense-making processes in a more diverse group of people across two contexts, with distinct political features.

The EU has agreements with both countries in an effort to externalize migration controls (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). Both countries are characterized by mixed migration patterns, being defined as "the movements of persons who share the same routes but do not have the same aspirations or legal status" (Syed Zwick, 2022, p. 2). Put differently, some flee because of

war, persecution, and/or environmental factors whilst some migrate voluntarily to BiH and Libya for economic reasons, such as seasonal work or seeking better opportunities. Additionally, the majority of migrants residing in these countries consider both BiH and Libya as temporary destinations, intending to move onward to Europe (Gholampour & Simonovits, 2021).

BiH, a significant "transit country" in the Western Balkans, faces a mixed movements situation. As of September 2023, there has been a substantial influx of transit migrants totaling 26.298 individuals claiming asylum, although the majority views BiH as a passage (UNHCR, 2023). While migrants come from diverse backgrounds, the top declared countries during this study include Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria (IOM, 2021), with the recent addition of Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine (UNHCR, 2023). As a response to "the 2015-16 humanitarian crisis", BiH adopted a new migration and asylum strategy in March 2016, aimed at coordinating and making provisions for migration and asylum management and developing action plans (Santic et al., 2022). Despite attempts to establish asylum reception centers, challenges persist, including coordination issues between governmental and nongovernmental actors at the national and local levels, accommodating refugees' needs in reception centers, and managing border control (Santic et al., 2022).

Libya functions as a crucial "bottleneck" in the Central Mediterranean for individuals intending to reach Malta or Italy through the Libya route. As of June 2022, over 800,000 people required humanitarian aid, with only around 45,000 registered as refugees (UNHCR, 2022). Libya hosts individuals from 40 different nationalities, with Sudan, Syria, Eritrea, Palestine, and Ethiopia being the most reported countries of origin. As a part of EU-Libya cooperation, Libya has agreed to ensure people's protection, maintain their human dignity, and improve refugee reception policies and facilities including access to essential services such as hospitals and schools. However, these efforts often fall short in practice, particularly in detention centers where individuals face severe abuses (e.g., sexual violence, torture, slavery, forced labor), poor living conditions, inadequate mental health support, food insecurity, limited medical treatment, and insufficient assistance for voluntary return (UNHCR, 2021).

3.2. Sampling and method

To understand migrants' sense-making processes in the given context, we draw from semi-structured interviews with migrants in BiH and Libya and complement them with expert interviews. All interviews were collected within the H2020 MIRROR project. For the interviews with migrants, ethical approval was obtained by the Ethics Committee of University of Vienna's (EC Nr: 00519/2020) and the expert interviews were considered "standard research" by the Internal Review Board of the Department of Communication at the University of Vienna (IRB Nr: 202001013_030).

Interviews with migrants ($n = 53$) took place between October 2020 and May 2021, lasting between 30 and 60 min. Snowball sampling was used to access participants. Access to the field in both country contexts was facilitated by intermediary actors involved in migrants' reception processes, such as local reception centers, NGOs, and civil society members. The interview guide was composed of multiple sets of questions such as participants' self-presentation and migration journey, motivations to migrate, encountered obstacles and challenges during migration, living conditions in their current country of residence, use of conventional and social media tools, communication strategies not only with those being left in the country of origin but also with individuals who met on the way during the journey and/or who they have already connections in destination countries. As previous research suggests, family life is important and helps people "in transit" to "feel rooted" (Crawley & Jones, 2021, p. 3232). What people share with their loved ones and their broader circle of friends about their migration experience is understood as a self-reflexive process, relating people who stayed back to their own situation. We, therefore, pay specific attention to the set of questions in the interviews beginning with "Do you share information about migrating to Europe?", "Would you recommend migration to others?" and

follow-up questions. This focus is owed to the understanding that sense-making is a constructive, creative, and highly reflective process of interpreting "the past, generated in specific contexts of the present" (Eastmond, 2007, p. 250). Therefore, interviewing is a suitable method for capturing migrants' sense-making processes about original-forward-backward migration aspirations through ambivalence in the context of "transit".

For the interviews with migrants, we adopted a "Do No Harm" approach (Krause, 2017) to ensure participants' comfort or well-being. In line with our interviewing approach, informed consent of all participants was obtained. As interviews were conducted online, we highly relied on "remote aided" strategies. Collaboration with intermediary actors facilitated interview settings, including arranging separate rooms and setting up video conference calls. In cases where local facilitators were not involved, participants were provided with an activation link to join the web-based teleconferencing tool directly.

Among interviewees in BiH, 16 men and 15 women were interviewed whereas in Libya, our sample was not gender-balanced, comprising one woman and 21 men. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 45. In BiH, interviewees mainly originated from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan, while migrants from African countries such as Sudan, Ghana, and Nigeria constituted the majority of participants in Libya. All interviews were conducted remotely by using teleconferencing tools due to the outbreak of COVID-19 (see Gruber et al., 2021 for more details). Most interviews were conducted in respondents' native languages, with English used occasionally as needed or preferred by the interviewees. The interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, translated into English (when necessary), and analyzed using inductive coding in MAXQDA.

To further contextualize the interviews with migrants, we also draw from expert interviews, providing deeper insights into the structural conditions shaping migrants' experiences. 42 interviews with experts in irregular migration (five specifically working in the context of BiH; five specifically in Libya) were conducted to understand the broader context of (irregular) migration, conditions of accommodation centers, migrants' situations at different journey stages, and local migration and communication dynamics. Experts included representatives from NGOs, civil society organizations, and journalists active in the migration field on-site. Experts were purposefully sampled, and a semi-structured interview guide was designed, containing sections concerning migrants' reported perceptions about Europe, the potential influence of various types of information on migrants' decision-making, and potential gender differences among migrants in relation to the structural conditions of migration. Written, informed consent was obtained and interviews were audio-recorded, partially transcribed, and inductively coded in MAXQDA.

4. Revisiting forward migration aspirations in the shade of ambivalence

In our interviews with migrants, we find that most accounts are characterized by ambivalence, which we divide into two categories: a) Ambivalence in relation to the nexus of migrants' current situation and migration governance in "transit", such as through reflecting on one's own, original and forward migration aspirations and experiences, dealing with feelings such as regret and hope in often precarious circumstances; b) ambivalence in relation to others and the complexity and burden of providing advice and information about migration to other potential migrants. The analysis emphasizes ambivalence as an expression of uncertainty about whether one's own migration decision was "the right one" and vagueness in what kinds of information can and should be provided to others. This, of course, is not independent from the "transit country" context in which migrants experience constraints and challenges in the course of everyday life. Recognizing the importance of the "transit country" context in reshaping migration aspirations as well as migration journeys, we first zoom in on expert interviews as they flash on the structural and situational conditions in which migrants reported about their experiences in both country contexts. And then, we move to migrants' self-reflections. By doing so, we aim to show the crucial bridging link between migration aspirations and ambivalence in "transit" which

highlights that migration aspirations are not linear as we can see in relation to people's current situations of "stuckedness".

4.1. Adapting to "transit" circumstances

The hardship many of our interviewees faced is shaped by the structural and situational conditions in "transit" which contribute to migrants' self-reflections, informing their migration aspirations. The expert interviews help us understand BiH and Libya as transit contexts to which migrants respond, thus providing our analysis of migrants' experiences with important contextual information as well as increasing the robustness of the analysis of migrant interviews.

One expert explains that the government in BiH was initially not well-prepared to host people temporarily:

"[…] When transit migration started in BiH, which was in January 2018, the governments here were not very well prepared to accommodate migrants around the territory of BiH for the time […] So, IOM became the main actor to actually find and negotiate accommodation spaces for those migrants and ended up establishing and managing all the official migrant centers that BiH has. […] In turn, as far as humanitarian mandates, recently, we are also starting to provide lifesaving humanitarian assistance to migrants that are forced to sleep outside. Why forced to sleep outside? Because the existing accommodations in BiH are specifically for single males and we have about 2500 to 3000 migrants that are sleeping in makeshift camps."

(Expert Interview, BiH)

This quote suggests how the structural limitations people face in the "transit context" can feed into migrants' sense-making process through which they engage with revisiting their original migration aspirations and reassessing their forward migration aspirations within their current situation. Being alerted to potential risks of irregular migration would not necessarily mean that migrants are well-prepared against all potential hardships throughout the migration journey. In reality, their sense-making process can be (re)made *en route* based on circumstantial factors in transit, as summarized in a conversation with an expert in Libya:

"In general, I believe that the awareness of migrants about their real condition in Europe is formed once they are already here, therefore not before or during the trip. Of course, even before leaving Nigeria, women are aware that Libya is a dangerous country for them. And once there, with the violence and everything they suffer, they have the confirmation of their idea. However, this is very [cursory] information. Therefore, while passing through Libya, the awareness of the danger of the journey matures."

(Expert Interview, Libya)

Ambivalence can manifest as the continuous negotiable processes in which social actors are constantly engaged (Hillcoat-Nallétamby & Phillips, 2011). Viewed in this manner, our data indicates that gaining awareness of migration governance while being *en route* is a part of the ongoing negotiable processes through which migrants adapt themselves to transit circumstances in given situations. Similarly, the statement below highlights the structural limitations people face on the Libya route and uncovers how people adapt to transit circumstances in Libya:

"[…] So, the men walk. They have money for the wife only, so the men literally walk for one week or two. When he gets there, the women started working already, i.e., cleaning or cooking. And from there, again, they gather the money for the trip to Libya. And then they leave for Libya and work again. But normally this time the men do not follow them straight away. They normally chose the more expensive smuggler for the wives so that they can be safer. The women make the money in Libya to give it then to their husbands to get to Libya. Anyway, for the wives, this is very risky as they could be raped."

(Expert Interview, Libya)

This statement further indicates that migrants introduce their own solutions to challenges that they have become aware of once they are in transit context. Once transit has become an experience, migrants are able to adapt to temporal and transitive circumstances such as not

risking of wives' lives due to potential threats of sexual violence. Relatedly, migrants very often experience long waiting periods in transit until they are empowered to move forward, fueling the feeling of "stuckedness" in transit and mobilizing ambivalence (Tazreiter, 2019):

> "So, about the decision to get a clear route, generally, there is someone that gives directions. But most of them are moving for a long period of their life, even years. So, they are moving from one country to another country just nearby. And after that, the condition of the other country gets worse or the level of expectations goes down, and so on. And they start to move forward... So, even the information they receive is changing. And as a consequence, the information they are receiving comes step by step. Even because they took the information in different places."

(Expert Interview, BiH)

Adapting transit circumstances in transit resonates with migrants' ongoing negotiation over the nexus of their own migration experience, their interaction in their new social context, and the everyday impact of migration policies on them. Therefore, trying to become more adaptable to continuous challenges in transit should be read together with migrants' ambivalence and their sense-making process.

4.2. Ambivalence in relation to the nexus of migrants' current situation and migration governance in "transit"

In this section, we discuss how the interviewees engage in the sense-making process about their own original migration aspirations and how they deploy ambivalence as a coping strategy in reference to their experience of "stuckedness" in transit. The ambivalence of migration is captured through the self-reflexive process of migrants' feelings of uncertainty which lies in their present and future. Ambivalence, therefore, works as a coping mechanism in times of "stuckedness" (Tazreiter, 2019), which can be translated into feelings of not being able to control their current situation and accepting the current situation, while keeping on waiting and hoping for more agency.

When our interviewees were asked whether they shared information about migrating to Europe, a majority responded by providing a self-reflexive account in which they questioned whether migration was the right choice for them or not. They did so by zooming in on their first-hand experience referring to different stages of their own migration experience (reconsidering their migration decision in the first place [origin country context], migration journey [in-betweenness], and transit country context [current conditions and migration governance]). Accordingly, ambivalence was expressed by questioning one's own migration decision, weighing both necessity and circumstances, and providing an open-ended response. Our respondents find themselves in a complex situation in which they continuously reassess their forward migration aspirations within their current situation, contributing to the mobilization of the interplay between forward and backward aspirations. To illustrate, Respondent 3 emphasized the often-horrific circumstances of her experience, yet specifically providing what she shares while indicating that this is rationally chosen ("I will say"), not interfering with what others use this information for:

> It is a very difficult way, in the cold of winter, dirty rooms, police beatings, loss of money that is difficult to obtain in immigration. Living with several families in the same room. They [the border police] take or break the cell phones. I said all of this and I will say: do not leave your house as long as you do not have too many problems.

(Respondent 3, female, 35, Afghanistan, interviewed in BiH)

The statement above also echoes the complexity of having aspirations in countries of transit by implying consequences: Only if she is able to lead a safe, more comfortable life, this experience will have been "worth it". The interviewee draws attention to poor living conditions, physical violence, and uncertainty of being able to move forward resonating how the nexus of the current situation and migration governance in the transit context accounts for the perception of her own migration experience. On the one hand, she mobilizes forward migration aspirations

by anchoring her reasoning on the basis of facing severe problems in the country of origin. On the other hand, she self-questions her decision to migrate by implicitly comparing her current situation in "transit" to the country of "origin" which, in turn, denotes critical reflection on whether original hardship justifies her experiences in transit.

Understanding consequences and carefully reassessing one's own situation becomes even more clear in the following account, which clearly states that dealing with regret is often part of daily life. People find themselves in a paradoxical situation between dangers and difficulties in one's country of origin and their current living situations, which are often more precarious. This paradoxical situation also drives them to oscillate between backward and forward aspirations. Respondent 5 self-reflected on her migration experience by comparing what she left behind back in Iran to what she has got in return:

> [...] Road conditions have deteriorated. With this "corona situation", migration has become very difficult. Unfortunately, I did not listen to my older brother [...]. But now I understand that no matter how much I have problems in my country, it is still my country [...]
>
> (Respondent 5, female, ~ 35, Iran, interviewed in BiH)

When the interviewee was further asked about any positive or negative aspects of migrating to Europe, she mostly recalled negative consequences of her decision to migrate, referring to the impossibility of maintaining a decent life neither here, nor there:

> [...] I have not yet seen anything positive in the middle of my journey that I would like to share with anyone. I can talk about kind people from Bosnia or the police and that they are well-behaved. But financially and professionally, I cannot guide anyone. Because I am still in the camp and I do not have a normal life that I would want to guide someone towards. I can mostly define the dangers of the road.
>
> (Respondent 5, female, ~ 35, Iran, interviewed in BiH)

The realization of how original migration aspirations are interrupted *en route,* which also grounds for the interviewees' vacillation between forward and backward migration aspirations, is more salient in some of the interviews as compared to others. Interviewees explicitly stated that they did not want others to experience the same as they have highlighted that some of them intend to return to their homes. In these accounts, it is perhaps most evident that migration aspirations undergo changes and different phases as a result of kinds of exposure to migration governance and situation in transit. The experience of ambivalence, such as being torn between being "stuck in transit" and the willingness to return home, accompanies people on a daily basis:

> I want my country to be stable again, I want the country to be better again, and I want the confidence to come back so that I don't have to go to Europe or somewhere else. I would want to live again in my homeland in peace. I don't want anyone to go through this suffering.
>
> (Respondent 33, male, 33, Sudan, interviewed in Libya)

Another way of applying ambivalence toward one's own migration decision is by highlighting that they could not have known what awaited them during their journey or in their current situation. Some interviewees, therefore, seem uninformed about the potential challenges and difficulties in attempting irregular border crossings and, potentially, in going through an eventual asylum-seeking process. We find a high degree of self-criticism, but also an understanding of one's previous perspective, expressed in explaining a mismatch between their original migration aspirations and their new, current "reality" that they have to navigate. When asked about her migration decision, this respondent tells us:

> For example, before leaving the country... For you [referring to the interviewer], to have a notion of where you are going. And, how you are going to meet at the place you are heading to. Yes, because we don't have [...] information on the way, we don't know what to do next. Just like when we came here
>
> (Respondent 2, female, ~30, Cameroon, interviewed in BiH)

Not knowing, understood as not having experienced something yet or not being able to imagine it, is a major theme in people's accounts. We find "not knowing" to be substantially different than describing a lack of information about the risks of irregular migration. Most respondents were highly alert to these risks before leaving, yet highlight those future experiences are 'unknowable' because they have to be lived.

Our analysis thus suggests that people acknowledge uncertainty and have a deep understanding of this uncertainty stemming from the problem that some situations become poignant when experienced, independently from having had information about them before or not. The analysis here highlights that people deal with such uncertainty by deploying ambivalence "as an adaptive behavior" (Tazreiter, 2019, p. 95) which also informs forward and backward migration aspirations given that migrants constantly adapt themselves to temporal and transitive circumstances in "transit contexts". This ambivalence can be understood as a reaction to one's own, individual migration experiences, which are hard to retell and to make others understand who have not experienced them. The clandestine migration industry makes irregular migration highly unpredictable (Andersson, 2014), thus open-ended.

4.3. Ambivalence in relation to "potential fellow migrants": attributions to border-crossing experiences

Turning now to how ambivalence manifests in relation to others, our analysis further confirms the complexity through which respondents navigate. Consequently, they have mixed feelings about advising others on migration. In contrast to ambivalence in relation to the nexus of migrants' current situation and migration governance in "transit", ambivalence is attributed solely to their own border-crossing experiences when the issue comes to advising potential fellow migrants to migrate or not. Two themes have emerged: individuals highlighting the risks of migration to others and individuals refraining from influencing others in their decisions. Across both themes, respondents deploy ambivalence, often through vagueness and an awareness of the complexity inherent individual's choice to experience or abstain from irregular migration.

4.3.1. Highlighting the risks of migration to others

Being asked to look back at their own original and forward aspirations and experiences *en route* and to consider their current situation, a majority of our interviewees (37 out of 51) would not recommend migration to others if they were asked for advice. Some say that the dangers of the route are too much to deal with and explain their experiences of helplessness, exploitation, border violence, and health risks. Besides, placing emphasis on the risks of migration on account of border-crossing, experiences elucidate the mobilization of backward migration aspirations rather than forward migration aspirations, as the participants' response formulation is centered around the perception that putting one's life at risk is not worthwhile.

For example, Respondent 5 did not choose to migrate but was forced by her husband due to the oppression of the Kurdish minority in Iran. Hoping for a better future for her children, she decided to migrate to Germany. However, she found herself completely alone in this journey as her husband abandoned her and returned to Iran with the children, leaving her disconnected from her closest family members. Despite her determination to move forward, her 18 attempts to cross the EU border were stopped by Croatian and Slovenian authorities. Consequently, she expresses highly ambivalent feelings about her initial and current situation. Her sense-making process reveals her own paradox: going back to Iran is not an option anymore for her. However, moving forward is not easy either, which again activates the interplay between forward and backward aspirations. In this regard, she expresses ambivalence, differentiating between herself as someone without other options but to continue, and potential others who are still in the decision-making process and should therefore carefully consider the uncertainties and challenges she has experienced on the way:

> But I do not encourage them to come to Europe. Because I was in Serbia for a year, I have been in Bosnia for a year and two months, I am alone and I cannot pull myself out, so I don't advise others to come. No, I do not.
>
> (Respondent 5, female, ~32, Iran, interviewed in BiH)

While the respondent describes her current case as the situation of transit that forces her to stay put, she advises others to migrate or not since attribution to ambivalence is made in reference to her challenging, perhaps traumatic, border-crossing experience. Allowing for ambivalence thus presents a seemingly paradoxical statement in a new, more complex light. Conversely, Respondent 45, who was on the road for three years (at the time of the interview), voluntarily left his own country to seek a better future for his family. However, he had to temporarily suspend his aspiration to establish a new life in Europe since he felt stuck not only physically but also emotionally in Libya. Thus, he does not recommend others to migrate irregularly:

> No, I wouldn't advise anyone to travel neither by sea, because it is a desperate journey, nor through different routes.
>
> (Respondent 45, male, 24, Nigeria, interviewed in Libya)

Respondent 45's experiences are typical for the Libya route, highlighting the structural limitations people face. What is crucial here is that Respondent 45 does not recommend migration to others especially if the migration journey takes place through irregular crossings as happened in his case. Besides, he engages in a self-reflection process of his own desperate journey by mobilizing backward aspirations which makes him arrive at the conclusion that nobody should irregularly migrate.

As the interviews above have shown, the participants have a strong tendency to discourage other people who intend to migrate to Europe through irregular ways since they do not want others to suffer from all the dangers and uncertainties *en route* as they did. In their case, they find themselves in limbo given that they are not in a position where they can decide on their own fate. As they get stuck between their irremediable past and unknown future, ambivalence is mobilized as a sort of mission, centered around backward aspirations that aim at warning others about the potential dangers and risks of desperate journeys.

Asking interviewees to assess their own reasons for migration helps to highlight that migration is not only a "forward-oriented" (Triandafyllidou, 2022) but a self-reflective, individual experience in which interviewees deploy flexibility and reassess both original and forward migration aspirations critically by activating backward aspirations. References to "stuckedness" are made in the context of uncertainty which is exacerbated by the endless cycle of irregular border crossings and deportations.

Yet, we find exceptions who maintain a forward-looking orientation in "stuckedness", which makes a more favorable future worth the risk of migration. In this rather rare occasion where an interviewee would consider recommending migration based on his own forward aspirations, we nevertheless see that interviewees understand the complexity that comes together in migration decisions and aspirations:

> If someone has already set out to migrate, they don't need advice from you. If he already has the intention, he may be more motivated than you are.

When the interviewee's standpoint explicitly asked for, he replied "Yes, I would motivate them," and then continued:

> I would suggest others undertake this journey for a better future, for better education, and for better work. For a better and peaceful life.
>
> (Respondent 36, male, 18, Sudan, interviewed in Libya)

Nevertheless, it is somewhat striking that the majority would not recommend migration at all or suggest legal ways to migrate, which as they know, is not possible for a lot of people. This pattern, at first, highlights a somewhat paradoxical sentiment that is, however, too easily translated into plain regret or naivete. Instead, as our analysis suggests in the following section, the pattern of not recommending migration to others comes from a deeper understanding of and coping with the uncertainty that is owed to dangerous migration journeys that resulted in the "stuckedness" in "transit".

4.3.2. Choosing not to exert any influence on others' decisions

Due to different hardships and uncertainties that they have encountered *en route*, some interviewees consider that dis- or encouraging others to undertake the journey would be very risky as one's life could be at stake. For instance, Respondent 35 thinks that undertaking an "illegal" route to reach Europe should be their own decision because the reliance on smuggling would mean facing the risk of death on the way:

> No, every individual has their own path, but if I were to suggest anything about this journey, it would be to travel legally. It's definitely better than traveling illegally.

> (Respondent 35, male, 25, Sudan, interviewed in Libya)

Similarly, an Iranian woman, who fled from Iran to Oman and then to the Netherlands with her family, faced many obstacles on the way. Upon reaching the Netherlands, the interviewee was separated from her husband and deported by the Dutch authorities, leaving her stranded in BiH. When asked about advising others on the journey, she expressed reluctance, citing her own unsuccessful attempt to build a new life for her family in Europe:

> If one is not really in danger in Iran, why should one leave the country? If we had very good lives in Iran and if we had a good government, many of us would not be on these paths. One can try their luck, maybe one can leave the country in other ways, maybe not but I cannot decide for anyone, but many young people, who come here, it was more for their wishes living in Europe and they didn't have problems in Iran. The route is really dangerous, I don't think that it is the right thing to do. They are risking their lives even if they reach Europe on the way, in the camp… They are mentally and physically destroyed.

> (Respondent 18, female, ~40, Iran, interviewed in BiH)

All in all, when we asked respondents for their opinion about whether they would advise to migrate to potential fellow migrants, an emphasis was placed on their own border-crossing experience. Here, the social processes of migrants' sense-making concentrated on the early phases of migration that is the departure from the country of origin and the border-crossing experience itself till reaching the first "transit countries". Interestingly enough, respondents chose to highlight the dangers and risks of irregular border-crossings when the issue comes to advising others, instead of delineating other structural hardships and situational conditions as well that might await them once they reach the first "transit countries". Thus, ambivalence becomes evident here through their negotiable sense-making process in which respondents were constantly engaged in the phase of border-crossing.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our findings suggest that migrants mobilize ambivalence to make sense of their own migration experience, in line with Tazreiter's (2019) point that ambivalence is often a misunderstood tool for migrants to make sense of uncertainty. In other words, the way ambivalence is activated among interviewees enables them to stay open, vague, and undecided in relation to their uncertain, unknown, and constantly developing future, heavily influenced by the context of migration governance as well as their economic and social opportunities in their current country of residence. Interestingly, we

find evidence for ambivalence across two, rather different contexts. Our respondents in BiH as well as Libya are from different backgrounds and origins, yet respond to structural uncertainties in similar ways. While we do not aim to provide a systematic comparison here, *via* this multiple case study approach, our analysis gains in validity beyond one specific "transit context", providing evidence for what we might describe as ambivalence as a response to a migratory transition "situation". More generally, our research also raises doubts about simplified understandings of migratory processes, such as origin-transit-destination and push-pull factors, in line with other research on transit contexts and migration governance (Düvell, 2012; Hadj Abdou, 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2022).

The results indicate that people show considerable flexibility as they find themselves forced to having to constantly adapt their hopes and imagined futures in "transit contexts". Their answers, concerning whether they recommended migrating, speak of disillusionment, but also of the understanding that migration is an individual decision, with complex implications that cannot be foreseen by others. Narratives that seem contradictory or suggest migrants' naivete about irregular migration can rather be understood as reactions to complexity and expressions of ambivalence in uncertain and vaguely defined legal situations.

Our findings show that dealing with the "unknowable" is substantially different than being unaware of the risks and dangers of irregular migration, as is often assumed by European policymakers (Vammen et al., 2021). Uncertain livelihoods and situations are instead often constructed through European migration policies and externalization measures in place, which makes it impossible for people to make unambivalent decisions. Ambivalence is, therefore, a highly likely, multidimensional, processual, and rational coping mechanism when living in "transit contexts" (Tazreiter, 2019). This is visible in the high degree of conditionality and seeming paradox in migrants' accounts. If people were aware of what would happen, if they were granted asylum, if the border police behaved in a humane way, if refugee accommodations were livable; the list of uncertainties could be taken further, yet highlights that people do not lack awareness about dangers or risk of irregular migration, but, in fact, cope with this uncertainty through ambivalence—by accepting the "unknowable". The "unknowable" is dependent on individual case-processing, the discretionary powers of border police and staff in temporary accommodation, as much as on coincidence whether one meets helpful other migrants and NGO workers.

As original migration aspirations are being revisited and forward migration aspirations are being reassessed, the actual decision of whether or not to migrate can only be made in hindsight, which is why *backward migration aspirations* require more attention if one aims to understand the complexity of irregular migration and people's experiences as they are stuck in transit. Similarly, since one's own, individual migration experience is strongly dependent on coincidence, policies, and the clandestine migration industry, our interviewees make sense of their migration experience as, unavoidably, open-ended, oscillating between hope and despair.

The paper aimed to contribute to the literature in four ways. First, while ambivalence has widely been used in the migration literature as an institutional strategy to deter migrants, we highlight the *multidimensional* and *processual* nature of ambivalence. Thus, our analysis contributes to a better understanding of the complex, social processes of sense-making among migrants in the context of "transit", instead of focusing on outcomes (Boccagni & Kivisto, 2019). Second, we, by adopting a migrant-centered approach, challenged the prevailing concept of "transit" as merely a "journey to Europe", instead linking migrants' own experiences to the social and situational structures of uncertainty within contexts officially designated and regulated as "transit countries". This perspective emphasizes the need to perceive migrants as active, reflective, and decision-making individuals. Their responses to uncertainty and ambivalence provide important insights into their resilience to adapt to hostile circumstances. Third, our findings also make a conceptual contribution to the migration aspirations literature by introducing the term *"backward aspirations",* being interpreted as a consequence of the interruption of forward migration aspirations during the migration journey. Last, our findings highlight the immorality of migration governance. Many of our respondents express regret about their decision to migrate or hesitate to recommend it to others. However, for them, it's too late. Deterrence policies, designed to

dissuade migrants from embarking on risky journeys, also foster uncertainty and insecurity for migrants in transit. The persistent risk of being intercepted, detained, or deported evokes fear and anxiety among migrants, contributing to a pervasive sense of ambivalence about their migration journey. They may grapple with conflicting emotions, torn between the desire for safety and opportunity on one side, and the apprehension of facing obstacles and dangers on the other. Deterrence policies often interrupt migrants' aspirations, forcing them to reconsider their decisions and adapt to changing circumstances. The imposition of barriers and restrictions may compel migrants to reassess their options and weigh the risks and benefits of continuing their journey, staying put, or returning to their country of origin. This uncertainty can further contribute to heightened ambivalence among migrants in transit.

That being said, our study is limited in its reach beyond "transit" contexts and highlights the need for more research, including comparative research to systematically approach migrants' experiences in the borderlands around the EU. Of particular interest could be to compare responses "in transit" to responses in "destination countries" after an asylum application has been submitted. Furthermore, to better understand changes in people's migration aspirations *en route*, quantitative research, that tests the potential effects a successful asylum application might have on people's experiences in hindsight, is necessary. Such points of focus in migration research will make people's voices and experiences more visible, thus potentially contributing to applying more humane approaches to migration governance.

Note

1. Informed by Carling's critical approach (Carling 2023), we adopt the term "migrants" inclusively to encompass all individuals in motion, such as undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, regardless of their legal status at any given time.

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