



Working-Class Migrants: Are they Motivated by Higher Social Wages and/or a Better Lifestyle?

RESEARCH

MAARJA SAAR

ELLU SAAR

TIIT TAMMARU

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

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ABSTRACT

The article uses the concepts of social wage and lifestyle migration to discuss the motivators of working-class migrants from Estonia to Nordic countries (Finland and Sweden). The present research challenges the long-standing tradition of depicting working-class migrants as strict income-maximizers, who are merely motivated by obtaining higher wages, regardless of the broader aspects of social well-being (including public welfare) and of lifestyle. Our analysis indicated that working-class migrants possess hybrid motivation for migration: their motivators are connected with social wages as well as lifestyle but in different degrees. Both quantitative data and interview data show that distinguishing different types of migration is problematic and, as suggested, we should move from differentiating between lifestyle and welfare migrants to talking about lifestyle and welfare in migration. The article is based on data from survey 'Estonians in Finland 2019' as well as 30 interviews with Estonian migrants in Sweden and Finland.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Maarja Saar

Department of Education,
Psychology and Social
Work, Mid Sweden
University

maarja.saar@miun.se

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INTRODUCTION

Migration studies have long been divided between economic models that emphasize material incentives and lifestyle migration research that focuses on well-being and personal fulfillment. This dichotomy has led to the assumption that working-class migrants move primarily for financial gain or social welfare benefits, while middle-class and affluent migrants engage in migration for lifestyle enhancement (Benson & O'Reilly 2009; Borjas 1999). This article challenges this rigid categorization by demonstrating that working-class migration is also shaped by complex negotiations between economic stability, labor rights, welfare provision, and broader quality-of-life concerns. Rather than viewing economic security and lifestyle aspirations as separate forces, we argue that they are deeply intertwined, particularly in the case of Estonian migrants in Finland and Sweden.

The dominant theoretical frameworks in migration research—the welfare magnet hypothesis (Borjas 1999) and lifestyle migration research (Benson 2011, 2013; Janoschka & Haas 2013; Osbaldiston 2010)—continue to operate as distinct and self-contained categories. The welfare magnet hypothesis suggests that migrants are drawn to generous welfare states for financial benefits, whereas lifestyle migration research typically focuses on privileged Westerners relocating for leisure and personal growth. These conceptual boundaries have obscured the ways in which structural welfare provisions actively shape migrants' lifestyle preferences, making welfare not just a pull factor but a key component of well-being aspirations.

A particularly underexplored question in migration studies is how welfare provision at a structural level aligns with and even facilitates migrants' lifestyle aspirations. European welfare models differ in their emphasis on family support, labor protections, and social security, meaning that migrants may select destinations based not only on financial incentives but also on how well these welfare structures align with their values and long-term aspirations. For some, strong family oriented policies may be decisive, while others may prioritize career mobility and flexible labor markets. These considerations demonstrate that welfare and lifestyle are not separate concerns but instead interwoven factors influencing migration decisions.

Despite increasing calls to rethink migration typologies (King 2002, 2018), research on intra-European Union migration has often reinforced a divide between low-skilled Eastern European migrants and highly skilled Western European migrants (Hof 2019; Vasey 2017). Similarly, labor migrants, lifestyle migrants, and family migrants have been treated as separate categories, even though many migrants navigate multiple motivations simultaneously. The case of Estonian migration to Finland and Sweden complicates these binaries, as migrants cite not only higher wages and job security but also improved work-life balance, stronger social protections, and greater overall well-being as key reasons for their migration.

This article follows Emilsson and Adolfsson (2019) in linking lifestyle migration to the broader concept of well-being, expanding its conventional definition beyond retirement migration and second-home ownership (Benson & O'Reilly 2009). Rather than seeing Estonian migration to Finland and Sweden as a privileged movement of affluent individuals, we argue that it represents a search for stability, security, and improved living conditions within the Nordic welfare states as spaces of well-being. In doing so, we build on Varriale's (2021) insights into how vocationally trained Italian migrants in England pursued migration not merely for economic reasons but as a means of self-realization and improved life quality achieved through, among other things, better

employment conditions. By approaching welfare and lifestyle as interconnected dimensions of migration, rather than as distinct categories, we contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what motivates contemporary labor migration.

Empirically, this article is based on a representative survey of 2,000 Estonians in Finland, as well as 30 in-depth interviews with working-class Estonian migrants in Finland and Sweden. The survey provides quantitative insights into the role of welfare and lifestyle motivations, while the interviews offer a more detailed exploration of how migrants experience and negotiate these factors in their everyday lives. This mixed-methods approach enables us to move beyond abstract theoretical debates and ground our analysis in the lived experiences of migrants navigating economic and lifestyle aspirations simultaneously.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The conventional approach to migration studies has often compartmentalized the motivations behind migration into economic and lifestyle-related factors. However, we argue that such a division fails to capture the interconnected nature of well-being, which encompasses both material security and more intangible aspects of quality of life. By reconsidering the migration of Estonians to Finland and Sweden as a pursuit of stability and improved living conditions, we challenge the dominant paradigms that either emphasize economic necessity or privilege-driven lifestyle choices.

Traditional economic migration theories have long underscored the importance of social wages, which encompass both direct financial remuneration and welfare provision (Giuletti 2014; Haas 2010). The well-established welfare magnet hypothesis (Borjas 1999) posits that migrants from less-affluent countries are drawn to wealthier welfare states primarily due to economic incentives and the availability of social benefits. This perspective has been influential in shaping both academic discussions and policy frameworks, often leading to assumptions that migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including Estonia, are primarily economically motivated and associated with lower-class status (Runfors, Saar & Fröhlig, 2022; Snel, Faber & Engbersen 2015). However, while financial security is undeniably a significant factor, this view oversimplifies the motivations behind migration, ignoring the broader dimensions of well-being, which include labor conditions, social security, and personal aspirations.

Critics of the welfare magnet hypothesis argue that it overestimates migrants' knowledge of welfare provisions and underestimates their prioritization of factors such as stability and security (Kaushal 2005). In line with De Haas' (2014) call for a more nuanced understanding of the welfare-migration relationship, we propose that welfare is not merely a financial calculation but a crucial component of lifestyle considerations. Social-protection strategies and labor rights, as explored by Faist and Bilecen (2015), shape migrants' experiences by influencing their ability to navigate social risks and opportunities. For example, while formal social protection can offer economic security, restrictive residency requirements in Nordic countries (Forssell 2013) may limit migrants' mobility and family connections, forcing them to weigh material benefits against other aspects of well-being.

The expectation of welfare's importance for CEE migrants in Western European countries is also intertwined with class dynamics. These migrants are often presumed to have lower-class backgrounds, making them more reliant on social services (Runfors, Saar & Fröhlig, 2022; Snel, Faber & Engbersen 2015). However, such

assumptions remain largely unexplored regarding which aspects of welfare provision are considered crucial and why. There is also evidence that many migrants may avoid relying on formal welfare benefits due to restrictive eligibility criteria, as in the Swedish case, where high residency requirements limit accessibility to needs-based benefits (Forssell 2013). This complexity underscores that migration decisions are shaped by more than just economic calculations; they are embedded in broader concerns about security, social protection, and individual agency.

While the relationship between social class and migration has been considered from different angles, the problem of how social class shapes both migration decision-making and migration motives has received rather less attention (Cederberg 2017; Mapril 2014; Varriale 2021). Social class in this article is defined through a range of hierarchical positions in society, with power and wealth being distributed unevenly across people who belong to various social classes (see Chan & Goldthorpe 2007; van Hear 2014). This article bases social class, as most migration studies do, on the type of work migrants engage in, distinguishing between blue- and white-collar workers. Following Bradley (2014), we use a broad definition of the working class, including skilled and unskilled manual workers as well as a feminized middle group of low-paid workers in care and leisure services.

Traditional lifestyle migration studies have largely focused on affluent Westerners moving in pursuit of leisure and personal fulfillment (Benson & O'Reilly 2009). In their more recent work, Benson and O'Reilly (2015) suggest turning the attention away from the characteristics of lifestyle migrants and focusing on the meaning of lifestyle for migrants. For that purpose, they suggest talking about 'lifestyle in migration' and not 'lifestyle migration,' an idea that fits in with the central premise of their article that emphasizes the problematic distinction between lifestyle versus economically motivated migration. Furthermore, in her recent article, Benson (2020) explores the structural influences that lifestyle migrants experience due to Brexit.

Some of the recent scholarship suggests that lifestyle migration should not be restricted to elite groups but also applied to migrants from working- and lower-middle-class backgrounds who pursue migration as a means of self-realization and status distinction (Varriale 2021). Varriale's study of vocationally trained Italians moving to England after the 2008 economic crisis demonstrates how aspirations for adventure, cosmopolitanism, and personal development shape migration decisions, even among those typically categorized as labor migrants. By broadening the concept of lifestyle migration, we can better understand the complex interplay between economic and non-economic motivations. Many working-class migrants do not view employment solely as a financial necessity but as a means to experience new cultural environments, improve their social standing, and pursue individual self-making projects (see Varriale 2021).

Moreover, the individualization process, typically associated with university-educated migrants, also applies to working-class migrants, albeit in classed, racialized, and gendered ways (Varriale 2021). Many non-graduate migrants engage in mobility to escape social constraints in their home countries, improve their perceived status, or align with their aspirations for a more fulfilling life. Varriale's study also illustrates that many Italian working-class migrants connected their migration with a critique of how wider structural problems in their society, such as economic crises, were addressed, leading to a decrease in employment protection. Our article makes similar conclusions regarding how Estonian migrants in Nordic societies perceived neoliberalism and used it as a background motivation for explaining their increased life quality in

Nordic societies. Furthermore, [Saar and Saar \(2020\)](#) argue that the preferred lifestyle is often linked to life stage, stating that the needs considered relevant vary depending on one's circumstances. This can also be extended to economic position, suggesting that the concept of lifestyle should account for the quality of life migrants experienced before migration. Defining lifestyle solely through concepts such as aspirations for self-development or cultural exploration may reflect a class bias and fail to consider those whose lives are constrained by economic insecurity.

CONTEXT

Estonian migration to Finland and Sweden

Estonia, like other CEE countries, became a country of emigration after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. For Estonians, the most important emigration destination has been Finland. The emigration rate to Finland was its highest in 2012, when, according to the data of the Statistical Office of Finland, the number of migrants from Estonia totaled more than 6,400; however, in the years following, migration started to decline ([Tammaru, Kährik & Torpan 2020](#)). Almost half of all those who leave Estonia go to Finland, and approximately 50,000 Estonian citizens are living there permanently. However, emigration from Estonia to Sweden also significantly increased from 2005 again, especially after the economic crisis of 2008. We should keep in mind that Statistics Estonia underestimates the emigration flows because not all Estonians have changed their place of residence in the Estonian Population Register, yet they have registered in their destination country. It is also important to acknowledge when studying the statistics that a person should only be registered as an immigrant in Nordic countries if their intention is to stay for at least one year. This means that those coming as seasonal workers or for shorter work periods are not included in the population statistics. A rather common phenomenon is the employment of so-called posted workers, who work in Finland and Sweden yet are employed by an employer in Estonia.

In addition to Estonians who are permanently settled in Finland, there are many Estonians who live and work temporarily in Finland ([Sippola & Kall 2016](#)). Estonia has become a country with one of the largest numbers of commuters in Europe; currently, there are about 15.8 commuters per one thousand inhabitants in Estonia. It is also a noteworthy fact that, in 2013, 14% of the working-age population of Estonia had an experience of working abroad, while the average of such in all of Europe is just 9%.

The Estonians who live and work in Finland and Sweden are a heterogeneous group as regards their occupational status ([Anniste & Tammaru 2014](#)). In Finland, over-presented groups include skilled workers (especially construction workers) among men and unskilled workers among women. There is a small Estonian migrant overrepresentation in construction and the health and personal services in Sweden ([Gerdes & Wadensjö 2014](#)). Studies indicate that Estonian migrants to Nordic countries experience contradictory class mobility (for more about this concept, see [Cederberg 2017](#)): they have suffered downward mobility but have achieved an improved financial position ([Tammaru, Kährik & Torpan 2020](#)). As previous research has shown, Estonians advance quite quickly in the labor market of Nordic countries (especially in Finland) and reach the same occupational position they had in Estonia (Anniste, Pukkonen & Paas 2017).

[Alho and Sippola \(2019\)](#) indicate that Estonian migration to Finland is largely work-related due to higher income levels and better working conditions in Finland. However, another reason for emigration to Finland is that the Estonian neoliberal

economic model is highly exposed to economic fluctuations. These fluctuations, together with weak social security, leave the Estonian workforce highly vulnerable in times of economic recession (Kallaste & Woolfson 2013). The Finnish labor market, therefore, functions as an exit-option for Estonian workers struggling with low wages and weak welfare-state protection.

Welfare in Estonia, Finland, and Sweden

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia has pursued a highly liberal labor market policy, prioritizing economic growth under the assumption that a thriving economy would naturally resolve social issues. This neoliberal approach was further reinforced during the global financial crisis, when Estonia was lauded by the International Monetary Fund as a model of austerity, choosing to cut social benefits and further deregulate the labor market to remain debt-free. The country's commitment to fiscal conservatism came at the cost of weak social safety nets, making Estonia one of the European Union countries where social transfers have the least impact on poverty reduction (European Commission 2017).

Despite some elements of Nordic welfare influence, Estonia's welfare system has been largely shaped by Anglo-Saxon liberalism, emphasizing market efficiency, individual responsibility, and minimal state intervention (Bohle & Greskovits 2007; Toots & Lauri 2022). The introduction of unemployment insurance in 2002–2003 was a significant step, but benefits remained meager and coverage was limited. When the global recession hit, rather than expanding protections, the government postponed unemployment benefit increases while simultaneously enacting amendments to the Employment Act that made layoffs and redundancies easier (Kattel & Raudla 2016).

Family policy reforms followed a similar trajectory, relying primarily on cash benefits rather than structural social protections. The introduction of parental leave in the early 2000s marked a shift toward employment-linked benefits, aiming to balance work and family life. However, while generous in duration and replacement rates, these benefits exacerbated gender inequalities—the rigid structure discouraged fathers' participation in caregiving while worsening mothers' employment prospects (Lauri, Pöder & Ciccio 2020). Furthermore, income disparities in parental benefits have reinforced existing economic inequalities, highlighting the market-driven logic embedded in Estonian social policy.

Ultimately, while Estonia's welfare model incorporates some Nordic social-democratic elements, its overarching trajectory remains neoliberal—favoring labor market flexibility, minimal social protections, and a limited role for the state in redistribution. This approach has intensified economic insecurities for lower-income groups, shaping the broader migration patterns analyzed in this study.

Finland and Sweden share the core characteristics of the Nordic welfare state model, which is broadly defined as social democratic. This model is marked by the provision of comprehensive public services and relatively generous economic and social protections for the entire population across the life course (Esping-Andersen 1990). However, this does not mean that these welfare systems have been immune to neoliberal pressures aimed at reducing public spending and restructuring welfare provisions. Despite such pressures, the Finnish and Swedish welfare states remain, in both a European and a global context, comparatively generous and inclusive.

Both countries maintain extensive social support mechanisms, particularly in the form of needs-based benefits such as housing allowances and access to social housing.

Additionally, their welfare models emphasize universalism and redistribution, which help mitigate income inequality and promote social cohesion.

Moreover, both Finland and Sweden have strong labor unions and high unionization rates, which contribute significantly to regulating working conditions, safeguarding labor rights, and influencing social policy. This corporatist arrangement, where labor, employers, and the state collaborate in policymaking, is a key feature that distinguishes the Nordic model from other welfare regimes.

EU citizens acquire some of the components of social citizenship ‘automatically’ when moving to Finland (Alho & Sippola 2019). Examples of such benefits are the residence-based benefits, such as the rig. Acquiring full social citizenship in this system requires foreign nationals—even EU citizens—to complete a certain period of employment and payments before they become eligible for, for example, earnings-related benefits such as earnings-related unemployment allowance. The level of old-age pensions, for example, is dependent on the person’s work history. These earning-related dimensions of social security imply the need for social citizenship that accumulates slowly through documented employment.

Sweden, unlike Finland, follows a different set of logic when it comes to migrants’ inclusion in the welfare state. A central part of gaining access to most welfare benefits in Sweden is acquiring a PIN (personal identity number) (see Runfors, Saar & Fröhlig, 2022). In order to receive a PIN, EU citizens need to either have at least a one-year working contract or to be able to prove that they are able to economically sustain themselves and have existing health insurance. This in practice means that the boundary for accessing welfare benefits in Sweden is at the entrance level, where being included in the system is complicated, whereas, in Finland, the initial inclusion is not as difficult, but complications may appear later when the benefits are being applied for (see Runfors, Saar & Fröhlig, 2022).

The state social spending in Finland in 2019 was 30.1% of the GDP and, in Sweden, 28.2%, whereas, in Estonia, it was only 16.3% (Eurostat), which means that the services and provisions that the Estonian state provides are substantially lower than those in the Finnish and Swedish cases. These differences make Finland and Sweden attractive destination countries for Estonians.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This article draws on two complementary datasets: (1) 30 in-depth qualitative interviews with Estonian migrants in Finland and Sweden (conducted by the first author) and (2) descriptive quantitative data from the representative ‘Estonians in Finland 2019’ survey. Together, these materials allow us to examine both the broader distribution of migration motives as well as the meanings migrants themselves attach to these motivations.

The interview data were gathered from only working-class migrants—defined based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO)—whereas the survey data encompass the categorization of migrants to three different class-based categories to compare their migration motivations. It is worth mentioning that most of the included migrants did not experience downward social mobility, i.e., their social class did not change after migration. Preliminary analysis indicated that there are significant differences in migration motives between individuals in the higher middle class, lower middle class, and working class. In the analysis presented in this article, we compare the migration motivations of the working class to these two classes.

The conjoining of the two datasets happened after the initial analysis of qualitative interview data was done, and it appeared that working-class migrants in Sweden and Finland do talk a lot about social security and increased life quality. In particular, migrants in particularly precarious conditions mentioned the ability to rely on formal social protections in the two Nordic countries in comparison to Estonia. However, we did also want to test out our hypothesis on the quantitative material, as it had emerged based on the grounded theory method, which in itself is explorative. Therefore, we also included a quantitative survey of Estonian migrants in Finland to show the variation between different social classes. The quantitative survey to a degree allowed us to deepen our theoretical argument, as it shows that there are differences in motivations for migration between different social classes, but, put together with qualitative interviews, it also illustrates that what matters for life quality for different social classes is different. Simply put, a high-earning professional in Estonia might not find particular value in well-established formal social protections, whereas the life quality of a struggling single mother might depend on it.

INTERVIEWS

The qualitative component consists of interviews with 30 working-class Estonian migrants residing in Sweden (20 interviews) and Finland (10 interviews). Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, with inclusion criteria requiring that they had migrated from Estonia to either Sweden or Finland for work and were employed in occupations classified as working class according to ISCO-based categories. Recruitment channels included personal networks, migrant associations, and informal contacts.

The interview data originates from two separate projects (TRANSWEL conducted during 2015–2017 and the ‘Livelihood strategy and sense of control and agency of Estonian single mothers’ study conducted during 2017–2019). The interviews were semi-structured and biographically oriented, covering migration trajectories, labor-market experiences, welfare-related issues, and perceptions of future plans. Interview lengths ranged from 60–240 min. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, with a minority conducted via video-conferencing (Zoom Communications, San Jose, CA, USA) for practical reasons. Although the interviews stem from two separate research projects concerned with formal and informal social protections for Estonian migrants, the interview guides overlapped substantially. To harmonize the datasets, both projects’ materials were recoded using a common coding frame and analytical procedure.

The data material from both projects was initially coded separately using the grounded theory method. The grounded theory method was deemed suitable for both projects due to their explorative nature. Transnational social protection within the European Union has been an emerging topic especially in years 2015–2018, and therefore using the grounded theory method allowed an openness in data analysis. This article was born much later than the initial analysis was carried out due to the overlapping themes involving working-class migration and was theoretically motivated. The secondary analysis for this article included reviewing the initial line-by-line coding for both projects and going over the initial interviews. The method of analysis at this stage could be called abductive—meaning we were traveling between the data and the empirics. What we did in the second stage was to establish new overarching categories based on our objective; here, recurring topics emerged, such as related

aspirations, understandings of welfare systems, lifestyle considerations, and forms of ambivalence. In the third stage, we performed theoretical coding focused on the main theme of the article—the ambivalence of migration motives.

It is worth highlighting that the first author is herself an Estonian migrant living in Sweden. This positionality inevitably shapes, to some extent, how she approaches and interprets the experiences of other Estonian migrants—particularly those from working-class backgrounds. Having navigated the uncertainties of an increasingly precarious academic labor market, she is personally familiar with the tensions between aspiration and insecurity, as well as the complex role of social safety nets. These lived experiences may provide her with a unique sensitivity to the struggles of fellow Estonians abroad, even if their socioeconomic circumstances differ. At the same time, it is important to note that she is not actively involved in the Estonian community in Sweden and does not maintain regular contact with other Estonian migrants. This relative distance may offer a degree of analytical detachment, allowing for a more critical stance, but it also limits the extent to which her insights are grounded in ongoing, everyday interactions with the broader migrant group she studies.

SURVEY DATA

To contextualize the interview material within the broader structure of Estonian migration to Finland, we draw on descriptive results from the ‘Estonians in Finland 2019’ survey. This is a representative survey of Estonian citizens aged at least 18 years residing in the Helsinki metropolitan area (approx. 16,800 individuals). A random sample of 2,000 people was drawn from the Finnish Population Register. The survey was administered by telephone by trained interviewers and included structured questions on migration motives, labor market participation, daily activities, and transnational practices. For the purposes of this article, we analyze descriptive statistics from two sets of questions: (1) motives for moving to Finland and (2) reasons for staying.

Occupational class was operationalized according to ISCO, with managers, professionals, and technicians as higher white-collar positions; clerks and service and sales workers as lower white-collar positions; and skilled agricultural workers, craft workers, machine operators, and elementary occupations as blue-collar positions. Percentages reported in [Table 1](#) are based on valid responses to the migration motive items. As the goal here is contextualization rather than hypothesis testing, we intentionally rely on descriptive analysis rather than inferential statistics.

	GETTING A JOB	BETTER SALARY	CAREER ADVANCEMENT	BETTER SOCIAL BENEFITS	PENSION IN FINLAND	STUDIES	FAMILY
Higher middle class	63	52	30	42	36	29	65
Lower middle class	61	59	28	46	38	30	64
Working class	72	73	30	52	50	24	44
Total	66	63	29	47	42	28	57

Table 1 Reasons for migration from Estonia to Finland, % mentioned as very important.

Source: Author calculations based on the survey ‘Estonians in Finland 2019.’

REASONS FOR MIGRATION AND FOR STAYING: A COMPARISON OF THE WORKING CLASS WITH OTHER SOCIAL CLASSES

Across all social classes, several factors potentially attracting emigration from Estonia to Finland can be identified as important. The most cited reasons for migration to Finland were work-related (with references made to getting a job; a better salary; and, to a somewhat lesser extent, career advancement) (see [Table 1](#)). These motives were dominant for all three analyzed social classes but especially important for working class. Social benefits also emerged as an important driver. Better welfare seems to attract more migrants with working-class backgrounds than the middle classes (however, it is difficult to say what lies behind ‘better welfare’).

[Table 2](#) indicates that economic security and better job opportunities are the most frequent reasons to stay in Finland. However, there are significant differences between social classes. Work-related reasons are most important for working-class migrants. Economic security is important for all social classes. Social security and a calm and peaceful lifestyle were mentioned by more than a third of representatives of all social classes. Family related reasons are less important for the working class when compared to the two other classes. Economic security and work advancement hence emerge as important factors for the working class.

Two main results emerge from the quantitative analysis on the motives of Estonian migrants for migration and staying in Finland. First, our findings confirm the patterns identified in earlier East–West migration literature ([Black, Engbersen & Okólski 2010](#)): mobile workers try to maximize certainty in social and economic terms. It is often a mix of several types of reasons that facilitates the decision to migrate to or stay in the destination country. Besides social benefits and welfare, migration drivers are also connected with family related and peaceful lifestyle motives, which are both closely related to lifestyle migration. The mixture of motives for migration indicates the fuzziness between the solely welfare-motivated and the entirely lifestyle-focused migration—an aspect emphasized in recent works on lifestyle migration (see [Benson 2020](#)). This is true not only for migrants with middle-class backgrounds but also for those in the working class.

	BETTER OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORK ADVANCEMENT IN FINLAND/ BETTER JOB	ECONOMIC SECURITY	SOCIAL SECURITY	FAMILY CONNECTIONS	PEACEFUL LIFESTYLE	FINLAND IS A NEW HOMELAND
Higher middle class	52	58	36	34	38	16
Lower middle class	37	50	38	31	37	21
Working class	66	52	36	19	36	10
Total	61	53	37	26	36	14

Table 2 Reasons to stay in Finland, % mentioned as very important.
Source: Author calculations based on the survey ‘Estonians in Finland 2019.’

Second, our findings also indicate that, despite the subtleness of the effect of social class, there are some differences between middle-class and working-class migrants. The results demonstrate that both welfare and lifestyle motives are important drivers not only for the middle classes but also for the working class. These different drivers of migration emerge as motivators of these social classes but in different degrees. However, it is clear that working-class migrants are not motivated only by economic gains (higher salary and better welfare); for them, non-economic factors (e.g., lifestyle) are also important. Overall, the survey results indicate there is a need to analyze migration motives among the working class in more detail, not only because of the fuzziness between economic and lifestyle-oriented reasons.

LIFESTYLE AND SOCIAL WAGES FOR WORKING-CLASS MIGRANTS

This section illustrates how social wages and lifestyle are intertwined for working-class migrants. Rita was one of the working-class migrants who emigrated to Finland during the 2009 economic crisis. She describes the time of the crisis and her migration as follows:

Rita: During the crisis, many companies went bankrupt and then they did not pay [any] salaries. Then, your debts are increasing and you cannot pay them back because you need to eat something as well. And if they do not pay you salary for months.... I think there were many other single parents as well, many lost their houses, their children as well. In the end, I could not sleep anymore, I was constantly fearing that someone would come and say 'get out of your house.' But here... in Estonia, I would have never managed to pay [off] all these debts.

(Rita, female, migrant to Finland, care-worker)

Although Rita's move might seemingly be only related to her concern for money and, therefore, welfare-motivated, there are additional aspects that indicate that welfare in her case is also related to a more subjective well-being and lifestyle. First, Rita placed heavy emphasis on her feelings of anxiety and insecurity that she experienced throughout the crisis in Estonia. In her case, therefore, moving to Finland was not only about earning a better salary but also about feelings of trust toward her employer, along with feelings of security. Furthermore, she also emphasized trust (or lack of) in the state.

Rita: In Estonia, I feel that the state helps only when you have really fallen to the bottom. I think it is wrong. Because then you have more people who are in a really bad situation. I think it is bad because then people will never come out of it.

(Rita, female, migrant to Finland, care-worker)

This feeling of abandonment experienced toward Estonia's neoliberal state is counteracted by her feelings of security and support from the Finnish state. Rita felt secure at her workplace in Finland because she not only trusted her employer, who paid her a regular income and awarded her a permanent contract, but also because she knew, in the event of losing her work, the state was there to help her. By contrast, she felt alone and powerless in Estonia. It is clear from this exploration that seeing her migration only through the welfare magnet hypothesis is vastly simplifying, if not misrepresenting.

The ability to relax at work and not constantly fear losing work translates into a more calm and peaceful life. Social security, therefore, emerges as a multi-faceted topic, with clear impacts on the emotional state of mind of the interviewees as well as an influence on their lifestyle. This accords with the work of [Telve \(2018\)](#), who studied Estonian construction workers in Finland and suggests that part of their reason for staying in Finland was connected to a better working environment.

The improved balance between private life and work was a consistent topic expressed by working-class migrants in their interviews.

Kalmer: I think Estonians are work addicts. When a normal Swede stops working at three or four [in the afternoon and] goes home, an Estonian is working till five–six or seven–eight. They have a feeling they cannot finish their work otherwise. I think Estonians take too much responsibility, but a Swede decides that, if a work-day is finished, [they] go home. An Estonian will think: 'No. I have to finish this thing and that thing and a third thing.' I often had a discussion at home with my wife where I was saying, 'You don't have to make over the hours. You cannot do the work of [the] next day, anyway.' The attitude toward work is so different here. When I worked in Estonia, I had no vacations, no compensation for leave—nothing.

(Kalmer, male, migrant to Sweden, construction worker)

Kalmer stated it is difficult to imagine returning to Estonia because of the working conditions he had experienced there. He also explained what he perceived as value differences between Estonian and Swedish societies in terms of their attitude to work. This attitude was not only connected in his mind to the competitive environment and lack of job options but also to wider societal values concerning responsibility and hard work, which Estonian society emphasizes. In contrast, he found life in Sweden to be more relaxing, with a greater focus on free time as well as a balance between family and work. [Pajumets \(2012: 53–54\)](#) argues, drawing on the work of Inglehart, that material values cherished in contemporary post-socialist societies stem from the poverty and insecurity experienced by people in the state socialist era. In other words, materialist values still prevail over post-materialist ones. This has led to a conflict between family and work, in the Estonian context, which Kalmer expressed.

Even though Kalmer spoke about the wider value structure and the differences between Estonia and Sweden in this regard, it would be short-sighted not to refer to the class factor in this work–life balance aspect.

Raivo: What annoyed me in Estonia was that you always had these big deadlines and when you did not finish on time, then they fined you, so you had to work at night. Nobody cared. You had to finish on time. We do not have this thing here. I think maybe if we were working for the government or big companies, there for sure, they also are for sure stricter with deadlines. But we do not have this thing. When you do not finish on time, then you just say—it is taking longer.

(Raivo, male, migrant to Sweden, construction worker)

Raivo, like Kalmer, worked in the construction industry. Both mentioned the poor working conditions in Estonia. In contrast, the working conditions for the working class are better in Scandinavian countries due to the high degree of unionization and the power that such unions as the Swedish Building Association have in terms of collective

bargaining. Estonia has very few unions and very few people who are unionized (Kall 2017). In neoliberal conditions, the competition in a sector with a mainly low-skilled workforce will depend on the labor market. If there is an opportunity to either recruit from the local market or import posted workers from abroad without much trouble, then the working conditions for blue-collar workers will be subpar. The competition in a highly skilled sector in Estonia is, however, much lower, allowing such workers to negotiate their working conditions. Another construction worker noted:

Andrei: *In Estonia, I had no vacations, no compensation for leave, nothing...
The attitude towards work is so different here.*

(Andrei, migrant to Sweden, construction worker)

His reflection underscores the precarious nature of employment in Estonia, where basic labor rights such as paid leave and vacation time were not guaranteed. This lack of work-life balance, compounded by minimal job security, pushed many workers to seek employment opportunities in countries with stronger labor protections. Andrei's contrast between Estonia and his host country suggests that migration is not just about higher wages but also about gaining access to a work environment that values fairness, employee well-being, and predictable labor rights. His decision to migrate was not solely about earning a higher income but also about finding an environment where he could work without fear of exploitation and burnout. This case exemplifies how economic necessity and lifestyle considerations overlap, reinforcing the argument that migration decisions are shaped by multiple, interconnected factors rather than a single economic rationale.

Eduard: *I like the Swedish style of parenting. During my childhood, everything was so strict. I think children in Sweden have more freedom. I would like my children to experience the same. This is partially why I would like to move my family here.*

(Eduard, migrant to Sweden, construction worker)

This quote highlights how broader societal values—such as parenting styles and child welfare—play a role in migration decisions beyond just financial incentives. For some migrants, particularly those with families, moving to countries like Sweden is not only about securing better economic opportunities but also about providing their children with a more open, egalitarian, and supportive environment. The contrast between perceived strictness in Estonia and the relative freedom in Sweden reflects deeper structural differences in how societies approach child development, education, and social integration. This aligns with recent research on lifestyle migration, which suggests that factors such as personal development, well-being, and intergenerational aspirations are increasingly central to migration decisions.

Finally, Eva raises another topic related to child-rearing:

Eva: *Today I could not move back to Estonia because my child has [a medical] diagnosis. Here [Sweden], he is in [a] special school. I get financial support as well. In Sweden, there is [a] team to help you with your kid. I think in Estonia, people might have thought he was stupid and sent him to the school for idiots. My friend in Estonia had this case. In Estonia, I feel that the façade is more important. Like my kids need to appear successful. So if my kid does not conform to the norms.....well...*

(Eva, female, migrant to Sweden, care worker)

Initially, Eva spoke about societal attitudes toward children who have disabilities and the perceived gap between Sweden and Estonia in this regard. The stigmatizing attitude of Estonians toward children with disabilities, for her, clearly relates to the neoliberal values of achievement, whereas she found the attitude in Sweden to be far more caring and accepting. She therefore preferred her child to be educated in Sweden, where she thought he would have more opportunities in the future. There is, however, once again a class element present even in Eva's quote. It is relevant that she received state support for her disabled child. Being a working-class single parent with a meager income, Eva would not be able to afford private health care and support possibilities. In Estonia, however, state-funded support for disabled children is far less developed, and many parents of disabled children need to make sacrifices such as working only part-time and becoming part-time caretakers for their disabled children (Leppik 2002). For, Eva, all this referred to societal values and attitudes and was the prime reason she preferred to stay in Sweden.

Tiit provides the last example. He moved to Sweden three years ago and was initially unable to find a job. However, his specific goal in moving to Nordic countries was clear,

Tiit: One of the reasons why I was oriented toward either Sweden or Finland was to collect my pension for the future. It is probable that younger people don't talk about it, but this is one factor, because you can laugh or cry, but the situation of retirees in Estonia at the moment is...My mum and dad are retirees, and considering how much they have worked their whole lives and how much they have invested in this and what they can today...what they get back from the state...of course one can understand that the state maybe does not have resources, but this is not relevant for them at this point. So today, I am not sure I could go back to Estonia and work and think that I would get social help in the future when I become unable to work or when I retire... that I could live normally. This is one clear reason why I am here.

(Tiit, male, migrant to Sweden, truck driver)

Tiit's quote, while less evocative than that of either Eva or Rita, still clearly shows that there is an element of security, and, furthermore, an emotional element in why he chooses to stay in Sweden. He felt disappointed on account of his parents who had worked hard throughout their lives and now faced a situation in which they struggled economically and—even though he did not directly say this—could be seen as a betrayal by the state. He also voiced his concerns about the potential for welfare provision to be available for anyone in Estonia who is unable to work. This concurs with the general discourse adopted in Estonia, where entitlement to social benefits is most often earned through paid labor (see Runfors, Saar & Fröhlig, 2022).

This example shows that lifestyle, life quality, and welfare provision for working-class migrants were often intimately connected and, at times, it is difficult to distinguish one from another. The class element emerges not only through different financial opportunities, which working-class migrants might have, but also through the ability not only to negotiate one's lifework balance but also the relevance of having a well-functioning and generous state-provided welfare provision. The importance of this type of welfare provision is, however, not only perceived in material terms but also related to security, fairness, tolerance, and feeling supported.

CONCLUSIONS

The motivations for migration are a complex web of different factors, as also pointed out by recent literature. However, there remains a lack of theories that adequately integrate lifestyle- and welfare-motivated approaches, as well as studies that explore what exactly this fuzziness entails. Our results demonstrate that welfare and lifestyle in migration are related to other aspects such as values, emotions, and perceived quality of life but also to class and the subjective way migrants describe their migration experiences.

Our findings challenge the long-standing tradition of depicting working-class migrants as strict income-maximizers who are merely motivated by obtaining higher wages, regardless of broader social well-being considerations. The narratives presented in this study illustrate how social wages—comprising job security, work-life balance, and trust in state institutions—are crucial factors shaping migration decisions. Working-class migrants emphasized the quality of their working environment, which was less stressful and allowed for a better work-life balance. This aspect is directly linked to structural factors such as labor protections and union presence, which regulate working conditions and ensure fair treatment.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that working-class migrants do not see welfare provision as purely economic but also as an integral part of their overall well-being. The presence of a strong welfare system provided a safety net that enabled them to plan for the future with greater confidence and experience a general sense of security. For example, improved social benefits, parental support structures, and job stability allowed migrants to reduce financial anxiety and feel emotionally supported. This highlights how financial security and welfare are not just economic considerations but also deeply tied to emotional well-being. The ability to rely on state support in times of hardship fosters a sense of trust and stability, which is equally crucial to quality of life.

By considering migration as a search for well-being that integrates both welfare and lifestyle dimensions, this article contributes to a more holistic understanding of labor mobility. The Estonian case challenges rigid categorizations of migration types and underscores the importance of welfare provision not merely as an economic strategy but as a foundational element of migrants' broader life quality. This study also suggests that financial improvements—such as salary increases—should not be seen solely in economic terms but instead also as contributing to overall emotional stability by alleviating financial stress. More broadly, welfare state provisions function not just as material benefits but also as mechanisms that enhance emotional security and foster a sense of belonging.

Ultimately, this study calls for a more integrated approach to migration research, one that moves beyond rigid economic-versus-lifestyle distinctions. Instead of treating welfare and lifestyle as separate motivations, they should be understood as interconnected dimensions of migration that shape the lived experiences of migrants. By acknowledging the nuanced ways in which labor conditions, welfare provisions, and personal aspirations intersect, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary labor migration. These insights are particularly relevant for policymakers, who must recognize that fostering fair labor conditions and a robust welfare state is not only a matter of economic sustainability but also crucial for enhancing the overall well-being and emotional security of migrants in host societies.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Maarja Saar  orcid.org/0000-0003-4823-3551

Department of Education, Psychology and Social Work, Mid Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden

Ellu Saar  orcid.org/0000-0002-9682-448X

Institute for International and Social Studies, Tallinn University, Estonia

Tiit Tammaru  orcid.org/0000-0003-1590-1269

Institute of Ecology and Earth Sciences, Faculty of Science and Technology, University of Tartu, Estonia

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