

## Escaping the crisis and emancipating oneself: highly skilled mobility from Southern Europe

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### **Introduction**

Since the outbreak of the crisis in Southern Europe, growing numbers of young, highly educated, qualified and skilled Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese and Greeks have been taking their talents and expertise to other countries in search of better funds, better career opportunities and better payoffs. The economic and political crises in these countries, the austerity measures and rampant unemployment rates and the dramatic decreases in salaries and welfare allowances, have pushed young Southern Europeans to «vote with their feet», leaving for other countries or continents. The departure of Southern Europe's highly educated youth in particular has been described as potentially one of the harshest consequences of the crisis, triggering alarmed public debates as to the medium and long term consequences of this flight of brains at a time where innovation and creativity are critical for these economies to grow again.

Young, educated women and men from Southern Europe seem to be between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, Southern EU member states and specifically Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, are entering their seventh year of financial and economic crisis thereby offering their young citizens a national context characterised by collapsed labour markets, economic recession, sharply rising poverty and inequalities, as well as restricted professional development opportunities. On the other hand, young Europeans from these Southern member states, similarly to most citizens in late modern and post-industrial societies, are confronted with the accelerated anxiety, the existential uncertainty and angst that is associated with our current liquid modernity. In an era of freedom and

risk society as has been described by Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman and Bauman, 2011), individuals who decide to migrate combine the search for the self with economic rationalism, they act as free agents, criticising their home societies for repressing or limiting their potential, and rationally choosing to move to where it makes economic sense and they consider will enable them to fulfil their personal development aspirations. This context significantly frames and defines the decision taken by some Southern Europeans to migrate and move to another country.

Recent studies (ILO, 2013) have highlighted that the new Southern European emigrants have been motivated particularly by expectations for better career prospects and quality of life at destination. However, overall, there has been rather limited data on who is actually emigrating from the Southern European countries during these times of crisis. And, there exist very limited insights as to the reasons for which they are leaving, and what is driving their choice of destination.

We argue that the motivations for mobility of these young Europeans can be better understood by looking at the nexus between liquid modernity and the effects of the crisis. The current economic context magnifies the interplay between at least three reasons that are the drivers of highly skilled migration from Southern Europe. First, the decision to move to another country in this context is a way of «escape» from a specific situation and the pressures and limitations associated with it. Second, it is a strategy for the accumulation of cultural capital: international education can represent a strategy through which to increase «employability» (Brooks, 2006; Waters, Brooks and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). Third, the decision to migrate is intricately linked with the process of construction and reconstruction of the self of young, well-educated EU citizens. Their decision to relocate is driven by a combination of seeking employment opportunities (current or future) and a desire for exploration, discovery and experimentation whether in career or personal terms. To better describe drivers and motivations for the decision to migrate, especially in times of economic crisis, we try to tackle these points through the analysis of the data from an e-survey of 2013. In the paragraph that follows, we present some background on the employment conditions in Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal and emigration trends from these countries, together with a brief discussion on the literature on the drivers of highly skilled migration. The second and third section present the survey data and the main empirical findings on both economic and non-economic motives for emigrate. The last section summarizes the main conclusions.

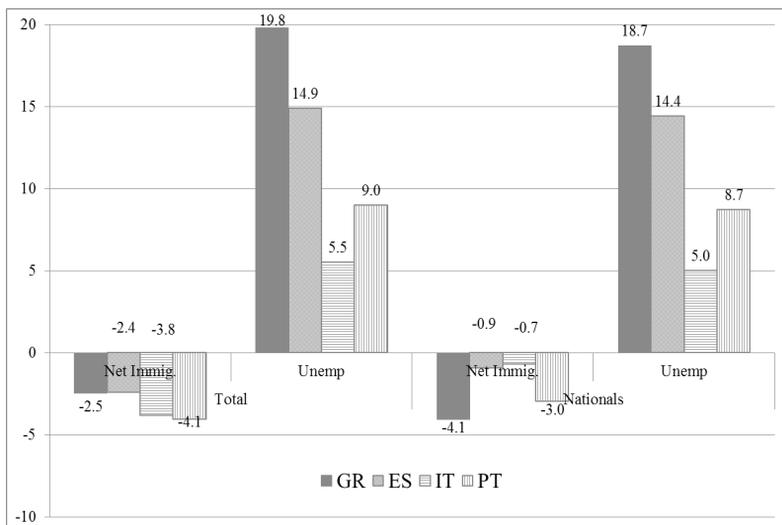
### **Mobile, highly skilled Southern Europeans**

The recent economic crisis has reshuffled the distribution of intra-EU migration with adjustments to changing labour market conditions possible through

the free movement of workers (O'Reilly *et Al.*, 2015): outflows from some Central-Eastern Europe have slowed down, some EU migrants returned or re-emigrated out from the most hit countries and the South-North migration route has re-emerged with people from Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal moving to Northern Europe or outside the EU (O'Reilly *et Al.*, 2015).

Data on *in and out* migration from our selected countries are not available by age or education level. Eurostat provides data on emigrants and immigrants by citizenship, through which is possible to distinguish the movements of nationals by those of foreigners. A negative net migration might be due to a decrease in inflows of migrants from abroad as well as to an increase in outflows of both migrants (returning to their origin countries) and nationals (Eurostat, 2015).

Figure 1. *Difference in the net immigration rate and unemployment rate between 2008 and 2013 – total population and nationals only (%)*.



Source: Eurostat online Database 2015

Figure 1 shows the change in the net immigration rate and in the unemployment rate between 2008 and 2013. Net immigration rates are calculated for the total population and for nationals only, by subtracting the number of emigrants to the number of immigrants registered at each year. The difference between the values for total population and nationals only is due to movements and unemployment rates of foreigners. In the case of Italy and Spain, net immigration

rates of nationals only are around zero both in 2008 and 2013, so that the total decrease in net immigration rates between 2008 and 2013 is mostly due to a consistent outflow of foreigners. Migrant populations in Greece and Portugal are less influent on total averages and the decrease in net immigration rate is -4.1% and -3% for the two populations overall. Regarding unemployment figures, the increase between 2008 and 2013 is striking in all four countries and particularly so for Greece (+19.8%) and Spain (+14.9%). Nevertheless, we do not observe a parallel decrease in net immigration (hence, an increase in emigration): foreigners seem to flight from Spain and resist in Italy, while Portuguese outmigration is almost entirely formed out nationals.

Beyond crude rates of in- and out-movements, the observed mobility could lead to better macro-level adjustments to the labour market conditions (OECD, 2012), but its effect at the individual level in terms of employment conditions and skill-occupation matches have to be carefully investigated. Studies on Southern Europe (Jauer *et Al.*, 2014; Gropas and Triandafyllidou, 2014) find that males, younger people and more educated ones are more likely to migrate than women, older and less educated persons. In addition, unemployment in the country/region of origin is neither the only nor the main cause of emigration. In other words, those who are unemployed and lower skilled are more likely to be stuck into a localised unemployment trap and may not be responsive to regional labour market disparities, while the more educated might be more likely to choose between being over-qualified for occupations available at home and migrating to find better opportunities.

In spite of its limitations, the Database on Immigrants in OECD Countries (OECD, 2013) is the only source for internationally comparable estimates of emigration rates by education level.

Table 1. *Emigration rate by country of birth (age 15+), total and highly skilled (%).*

	Emigration rates 2010-2011		Emigration rates 2000-2001*	
	Total	Highly Skilled	Total	Highly Skilled
Greece	6.6	5.9	6.9	7.6
Italy	4.3	8.4	4.6	6.2
Portugal	14.0	14.0	12.8	8.0
Spain	2.0	2.1	2.5	2.5

\* estimates based on BL dataset (Barro and Lee 2013)

Source: DIOC 2010/2011 (Arslan *et Al.*, 2014, pp. 59-61)

According to these data, the strongest growth in emigration rates between 2000 and 2010 was experienced by Europe and Latin America (Arslan *et Al.*, 2014, p. 37) and migrant women are more frequently tertiary educated than migrant men in many countries (Arslan *et Al.*, 2014, p. 45). In particular, patterns of emigrations vary consistently among the Southern European countries we are focusing on in this paper. Portugal is among the countries with the highest total emigration rate and highly skilled emigration rate (both at about 14%). Spain on the other hand shows a low level of total emigration.

Out-migration of the highly skilled from these countries is not a new phenomenon. Migration of professionals from Greece could be mostly attributed to the low demand for graduates from the private sector according to Labrianidis and Vogiatzis (2013, p. 474). Greece indeed has not been able to occupy a higher position in the global value chains; thus the labour markets in which engineers and ITs could be actively engaged in have been lacking even before the crisis outbreak. A similar situation can be noted in the case of Portugal and to a lesser extent Italy and Spain, although the phenomenon is relevant for the EU well beyond the geographic confines of the Southern EU member states. In fact, the EU's shortage in skilled workers in engineering, science, technology and mathematics is growing in a disconcerting manner with increasing numbers of highly qualified Europeans emigrating (to the US primarily but not exclusively) while at the same time the EU's Blue Card scheme has had rather limited results in attracting foreign talents<sup>1</sup>. The labour markets of the Southern EU countries in particular have not been able to absorb the highly skilled workers they themselves educate, largely due to the lack of investment in high tech and innovative economic sectors. For many highly skilled workers the choice often seems a binary one between a more limited employment in their country of origin (in terms of skill requirement, level of responsibility below their qualifications and with limited career development and professional opportunities) and wider, potential employment and career prospects abroad.

Among the highly skilled, scientists and engineers tend to be among the most mobile due to the international transferability of their knowledge and the fact that they are usually «wanted and welcome» migrants thanks to their contribution to economic innovation and the development of new technologies and products. Economic studies on the migration of science and engineering graduates have focused on wages and other work-related determinants of migration, as well as «qualitative» labour market incentives such as utilisation of skills or involvement in research and development (de Grip, Fouarge and Sauermaann, 2010). Qualitative research has instead emphasised the importance of career prospects in migration decisions and has suggested that non-monetary drivers such as the ability to achieve a better match between skills and job, the reputation of a country as regards the prospects offered by its labour market and

the potential for intellectual achievement are in place in the cases of scientists and engineers (de Grip, Fouarge and Sauermann, 2010). The highly selective nature of migration has also been long highlighted, as individuals with better labour market perspectives and high levels of human capital are found to be more likely to migrate (Fratesi and Riggi, 2007). Non-pecuniary aspects of occupations are more frequently found among scientists and technical professionals than among migrant workers with other qualifications: finding a better job match seems to matter more than specific wage gains, and this is particularly the case for people choosing to migrate to the USA, Australia and Canada (de Grip, Fouarge and Sauermann, 2010).

Moreover, previous migration experience including stays abroad during studies may facilitate migration choices since these individuals have accumulated experience in living in other countries (Parey and Waldinger, 2011). In fact, internships abroad or student exchange schemes may be extremely beneficial in terms of gaining invaluable experience in personal and academic development, and in decreasing the costs of future migration. At the same time however, some have recently raised concerns as regards intensifying the risk of brain drain from Southern to Northern Europe (Mathiassen, 2014). Finally, recent studies (Labrianidis, 2014) suggest that social class has to be taken into consideration as youth from less privileged backgrounds may be less mobile, but when they do engage in intra-EU mobility, their decision may be framed more as a matter of need rather than a lifestyle or career choice.

In this context, it is interesting to better describe and understand what drives the migration decisions of highly skilled individuals from Southern Europe, particularly in times of economic crisis.

### **An E-Survey on Highly Skilled Migration**

In 2013 an e-survey on highly skilled migration in times of crisis was launched in five languages by an international team coordinated by Anna Triandafyllidou and Ruby Gropas (<http://globalgovernanceprogramme.eu.eu/survey/>), to investigate the profiles and expectations of highly skilled individuals who left Southern Europe and Ireland since 2008. While the survey collected around 6,750 valid answers, we only use 6,377 of them in this paper to focus on Italian, Greek, Portuguese and Spanish individuals who had already emigrated at the time they responded.

In what follows, we try to single out the different conditions before departure and drivers for emigration of young highly skilled individuals who left before and while the economic crisis unravelled its severity in our selected countries.

**Demographic characteristics and the situation before leaving**

The main socio-demographic and educational features of respondent emigrants are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Sample structure by country of origin.*

		Greece		Italy		Portugal		Spain	
		Freq.	Col %	Freq.	Col %	Freq.	Col %	Freq.	Col %
Age classes	<30	418	48.0	302	35.9	1452	44.6	612	43.4
	31-45	424	48.7	430	51.1	1613	49.6	638	45.2
	46+	28	3.2	109	13.0	190	5.8	161	11.4
Married / Partnered	Yes	518	59.5	537	63.9	1546	47.5	869	61.6
Education level	No higher education	103	11.8	96	11.4	409	12.6	157	11.1
	Undergraduate	241	27.7	249	29.6	1456	44.7	186	13.2
	Master	414	47.6	358	42.6	1125	34.6	922	65.3
	PhD	112	12.9	138	16.4	265	8.1	146	10.3
Time of migration	<2009	170	19.5	318	37.8	843	25.9	331	23.5
	2009-2011	323	37.1	257	30.6	961	29.5	410	29.1
	2012-2013	377	43.3	266	31.6	1451	44.6	670	47.5
	Total	870	100	841	100	3255	100	1411	100

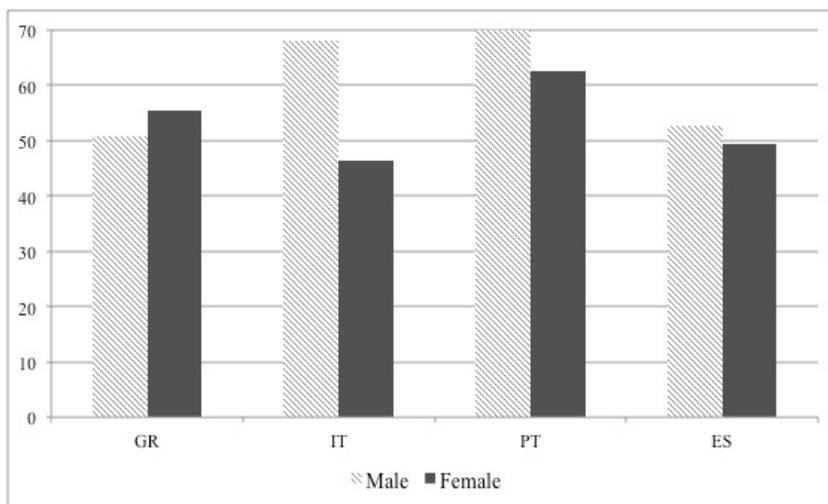
Source: High-Skilled Migration in Times of Crisis Survey

Our sample is fairly balanced in terms of age (44% below 30 years of age), prevalently with a tertiary education degree (88%) and male (62%), who migrated after the beginning of the economic crisis in all origin countries (74% emigrated since 2009). Looking at the year of migration, there are different timings of migration across the surveyed countries. While around 43% of the total sample stated to have migrated in the period 2012-2013 and another 31% stated that they left the origin countries between 2009 and 2011, Italian respondents appear to have a longer history of migration with 37% of them having migrated before 2009. This is also testified by their older age structure in comparison with the rest of the sample.

As regards education, while around 12% has no higher education, the remaining 88% is distributed across disciplines and specializations, from engineering and construction to economics, from IT to social sciences, humanities and education.

As for the conditions before deciding to migrate, more than 60% of all respondents describe themselves as employed before they migrated. While the lowest employment rates are those of Spanish and Greek respondents, the Italian sub-sample presents the bigger gender gap in employment rates (21.5%) and Portuguese males appear to be the most employed overall (70.2%).

Figure 2. *Share of respondents who were employed before migration, by sex and country of origin.*

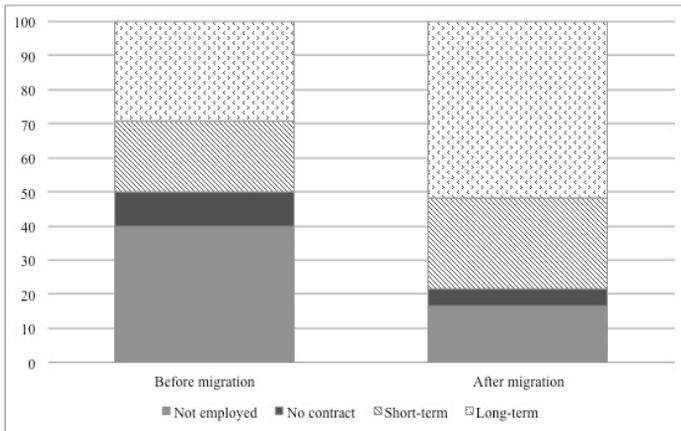


Source: E-survey on Highly Skilled Migration in Times of Crisis, 2013

To compare the employment conditions before and after migration, Figure 3 shows the situation of the total sample as regards the type of contract and employment status, distinguishing between those not in employment, those employed without a contract, those with a short-term contract and those with a long-term open-ended contract. The number of respondents not in employment significantly decreases after migration. Similarly, workers without a contract diminish while there is a parallel increase of those employed either with a short-term or long-term contract. While from this descriptive picture we can claim a «successful» employment trajectory through migration, the next paragraphs

dives deeper into the reasons for moving to explain why also those with a long-term contract migrated and why some of them were no more in employment or with less secure job position at the time of the survey.

Figure 3. *Employment status and type of contract before and after migration (%)*.



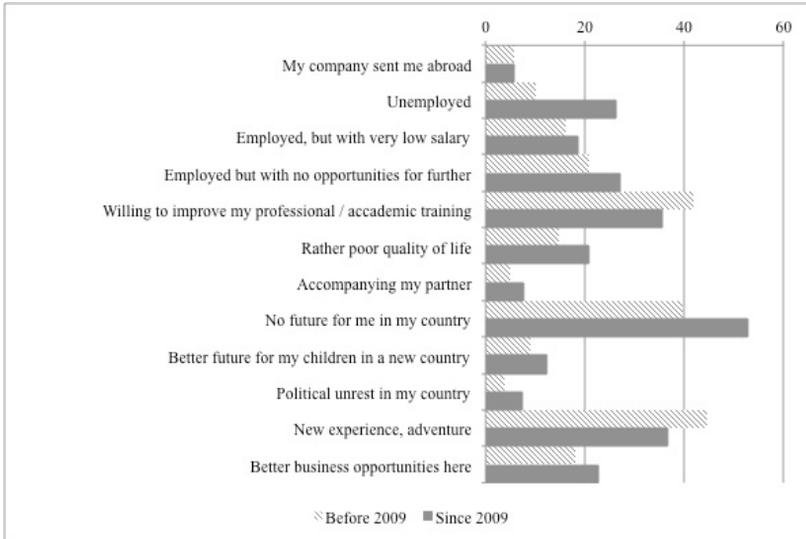
Source: E-survey on Highly Skilled Migration in Times of Crisis, 2013

### Drivers of emigration: investigating the reasons for leaving

The original survey investigated on the reasons for leaving the country of origin with a question which allowed multiple answers on 12 possible options. More than half of the sample answered ticking multiple options, as shown in Figure 4.

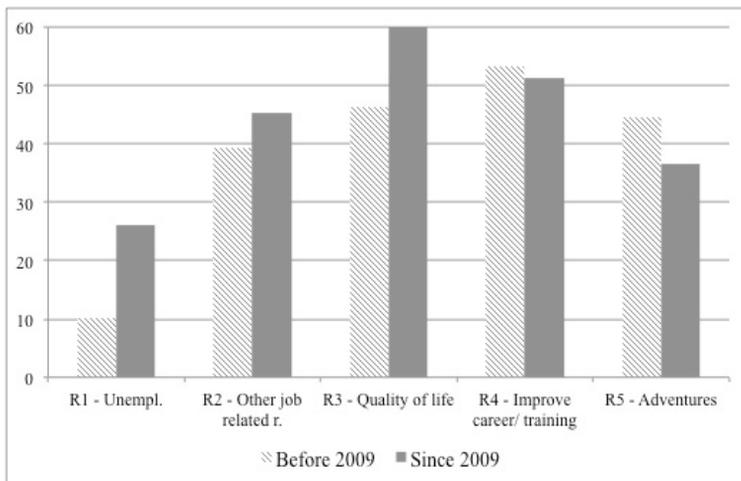
We grouped the 12 original options into 5 specific groups belonging to 3 broad areas, namely labour market integration at origin, the context at origin for present and future quality of life and personal aspirations and individual development. We checked the relative weight of purely economic motivations versus those that have a more holistic aspirational approach (to develop one’s career as well as one’s personality) versus those that are more typically labelled as quality of life. Our aim was to test how these three types of motivations weighted on the individual’s decision before the onset of the crisis and after 2009, when the crisis started hitting heavily on Southern European labour markets. After running a Chi-squared test between each reason and the time of migration<sup>2</sup>, we can claim that there is a significant difference in the distribution of reasons among those emigrated before and during the economic crisis. Figure 5 illustrates well these changes.

Figure 4. *What were your main reasons for leaving? (% , multiple answers allowed).*



Source: E-survey on Highly Skilled Migration in Times of Crisis, 2013

Figure 5. *Reasons for emigration, by time of migration (% , multiple answers allowed).*



Source: E-survey on Highly Skilled Migration in Times of Crisis, 2013

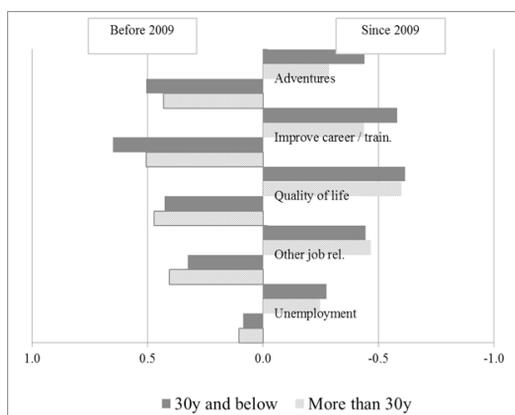
While the willingness to improve career or training is the first most common reason among those who left before 2009 and also remains important for those who emigrated since 2009 onwards (53.2 and 51.2% of respondents respectively), reasons connected to the quality of life and the conditions of the country of origin surge to 60.6% among those emigrated during the crisis. Interestingly, unemployment *per se* is the less frequently mentioned reason, but it is most frequent among those emigrated since 2009, with a significant increase from 10.2% up to 26.2% of respondents. On the other hand, adventurers seem to diminish among those more recently migrated in comparison with the period before the crisis. In sum, both economic and lifestyle motivations seem to become more prominent for those who left since 2009, while motivations related to personal development and individual aspirations are either stable (improve career / training) or diminish (adventures).

To disentangle how these patterns vary according to a set of individual characteristics, for each of the two groups – migrated before and since 2009 – we explore correlations between the reasons for migration and some meaningful variables.

### Sex, age, marital status

While we found slight differences between men and women in terms of reasons to leave, differences in terms of age are more evident. Younger respondents are more driven by personal development's reasons than those with more than 30 years, with the majority of them interested in improving their training or career and/or in doing a new experience abroad.

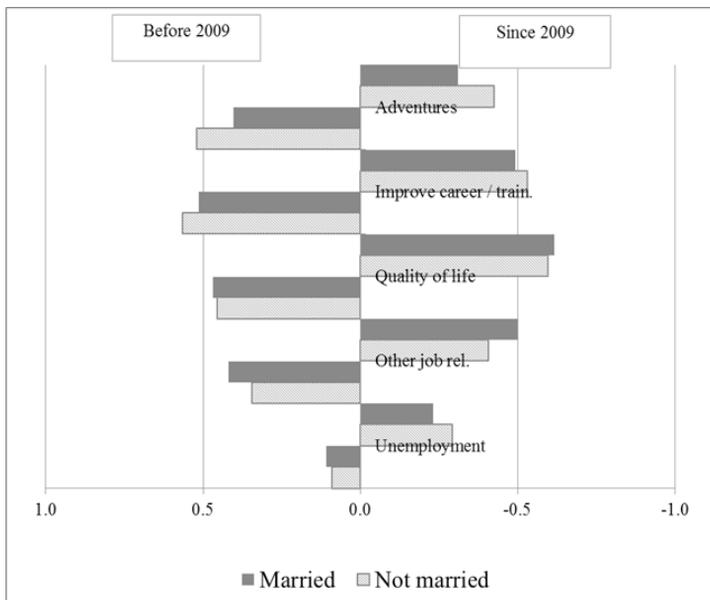
Figure 6. Reasons for migration by age.



Source: E-survey on Highly Skilled Migration in Times of Crisis, 2013

This is consistent with results distinguished by marital status: not married people tend to put more emphasis on reasons connected to personal development, while those in a couple are more likely to claim job-related reasons for migration (Fig. 7).

Figure 7. Reasons for migration by marital status.



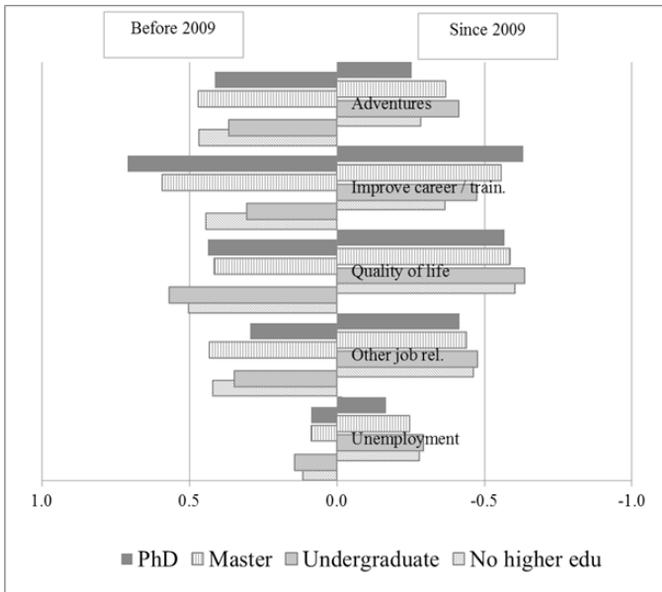
Source: E-survey on Highly Skilled Migration in Times of Crisis, 2013

### Education and employment status before migration

As for education levels, we already showed that the large majority of our sample has a higher education degree, with only 12% of the total without any type of tertiary education. Both before 2009 and since then, differences in the reasons for leaving vary according to the highest level of education attained. Unemployment becomes prominent only for those recently migrated, more for those with no higher education or with a bachelor degree. Also the reasons related to the quality of life and the conditions at origin seem to matter more for the lower educated. On the contrary, the willingness to improve training or career grows with the level of education, with those with a PhD referring to these reasons more than twice in comparison with undergraduate and non-higher educated

respondents. Those with a bachelor or a master degree are those more likely to refer to adventures and new experiences, which might be related to a period of break before completing the transition from education to the labour market.

Figure 8. *Reasons for migration by education level.*



Source: E-survey on Highly Skilled Migration in Times of Crisis, 2013

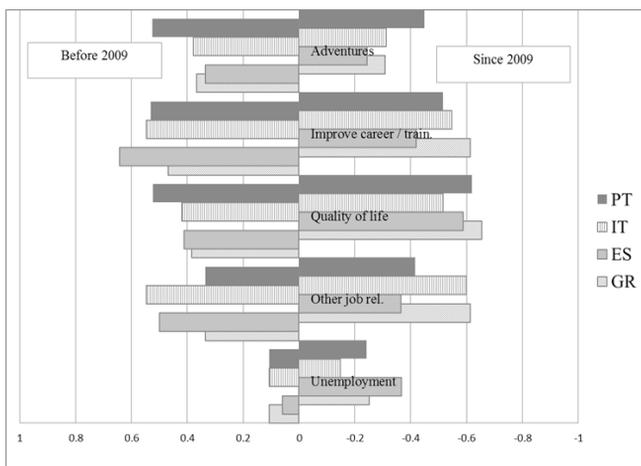
Almost two thirds of the total samples were employed before leaving the country of origin and among those not employed there were both unemployed and those still in education. Job related reasons (too low salary and moving within a company, among other things) are frequently mentioned by those without contract and by those with a long-term one. Those employed without contract also mentioned quality of life and conditions of the origin countries more often, while those with short-term positions are more likely to look for an improvement of their career/training path.

### Country of origin

Our last comparison regards differences in the reasons for leaving by country of origin. While unemployment seems to worry more Spaniards and Portuguese, especially since 2009, Italians and Greeks claimed in half of the cases reasons

related to the job they already had and to the need to improve their training or career paths. Portuguese and Greeks seem to be the less satisfied with the quality of life and the situation of their country of origin, while there is a big portion of Portuguese that at any time moved to follow their aspirations to new experiences and adventures.

Figure 9. Reasons for migration by country of origin.



Source: E-survey on Highly Skilled Migration in Times of Crisis, 2013

## Conclusions

Around the world, migration patterns have become increasingly diversified and we are consistently observing complex relationships between factors identified as drivers of migration. In an effort to conceptualise these changes, migration theories at the micro, meso and macro levels of analysis are consistently being revisited. In this article we have attempted to present some of the factors that affect the decisions of highly skilled individuals to migrate in a context of economic crisis. We have used our survey data of highly skilled Greeks, Italians, Portuguese and Spaniards to examine the extent to which the crisis context and the wider background of globalisation and liquid modernity, interplay with people’s desire for self-emancipation, their accumulation of cultural capital and, quite simply, their employment needs.

Youth transitions from school to economic independence and adulthood are becoming increasingly differentiated and protracted in time (O’Reilly *et*

*Al.*, 2015). Structural changes in the labour market, the increasing demand for labour flexibility and the changing requirements in terms of skills and abilities are intertwined with new patterns of migration of young Europeans within the EU and outside it. Youth unemployment in Southern Europe has increased to unprecedented levels during the economic crisis started in 2008. Long-term youth joblessness will impose costs on both individuals and the society well into the future: it reduces lifetime earnings, increases the probability of unemployment periods and of precarious employment conditions in the future, it is associated with poorer health and wellbeing conditions through the working life (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Blossfeld *et Al.*, 2015). Experiencing unemployment or very precarious conditions of work at the beginning of one's working life has important «scarring effects». In this context, «escaping» through migration seems a reasonable option for highly skilled individuals who have invested in developing their human capital and wish to see a «return» on it. Yet as we have illustrated through the survey data presented above, economic reasons are far from being the exclusive driver of their emigration.

There has been a change in the distribution of reasons over time and even though economic motivations gained more importance among those migrated during the economic crisis, other reasons related to the overall quality of life, lifestyle and country of origin conditions are equally important. As a structural feature, independently from time of migration and from other variables, half of the sample mentions the reason «improving training / career development». Adventurers may or may not be expected to eventually return to their country of origin after a period abroad. They are driven by curiosity; they are not escaping from bad conditions so they may be prepared to return. In our sample, while there were less adventurers departing during the crisis, more pressure on material needs is observable as there are more people who decided to emigrate as they considered it is no longer possible to have the life they want at origin. Given that, they are not prepared to renounce to what they think they could achieve in terms of life style and satisfaction somewhere else, they make the decision to migrate and may be less inclined to return in the future.

The current emigration from the countries of Southern Europe is different from those of the twentieth century. Those who are currently leaving are highly educated in their overwhelming majority and they do not follow cultural networks in their choice of destination country. They do not seek work and stay among their co-nationals. Their decision to move to specific country is the result of a combination of factors. It has to do with the push factors of their country of origin (related to both the causes and the consequences of the crisis) and specifically the employment conditions and prospects that they face as well as the political culture of their country of origin that they strongly criticise (clientelism, corruption, nepotism, rigid social hierarchies and gerontocracy).

Moreover, it has to do with the pull factors of the chosen country. These might range from open and flexible labour markets that offer the opportunity for upward professional mobility, to responsibility and meritocracy as well as to open and plural societies.

Our surveyed highly skilled emigrants from Southern Europe grounded their decision to migrate on economic considerations but equally so by non-economic motives that fall within what is generally referred to as post-materialist considerations and have to do with lifestyle choices, personal emancipation, and the desire to accumulate various forms of capital (cultural and economic) in order to maximise their potential for personal, family and professional growth/improvement.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See for instance: Campanella, Edoardo, «Come Home, Europeans. Europe's Brain Drain Problem Is Becoming a Major Crisis», in *Foreign Affairs*, 16.10.2014: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142218/edoardo-campanella/come-home-europeans>
- <sup>2</sup> Correlations (Pearson's) coefficients are not shown here for the sake of conciseness.

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