

Which (Im-)Mobility, for Whom and When? Exploring Power Geometries in the Post- Migration Mobility Trajectories of Highly Skilled Turkish Nationals in the Nordics

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Abstract: *This article explores the complexities of (im-)mobility among highly skilled professionals from Turkey residing in the Nordic countries. Drawing on 71 in-depth interviews (2020–2023), it analyses how power geometries – shaped by citizenship status, employment conditions, and immigration regimes – differentially structure access to mobility. The findings reveal a mobility paradox within this group: while their career advancement or temporary labour market positions require continued geographical mobility, they simultaneously pursue long-term settlement in the Nordics to obtain EU citizenship. These findings challenge dominant portrayals of skilled migrants as globally mobile elites and instead demonstrate forms of forced or strategic (temporary) immobility.*

INTRODUCTION

Human mobility, whether voluntary or forced, unfolds for a myriad of political, economic, social, and individual reasons rendering it equally complex both as a theoretical construct and as a lived reality. Mobility studies have increasingly drawn attention to questions of power and politics that accompany movement and connecting (im-)mobility to broader themes of social inequality, inclusion/exclusion, rights and democracy.^{1,2} Issues of power underpinning mobility have also been addressed in studies of transnationalism, notably in the work of Glick Schiller and Salazar,³ who were among the pioneers in critically examining the intertwined and mutually constitutive nature of mobility and immobility.

A broad definition of mobility encompasses both actual and potential movements and circulations of people, goods, ideas, images, and information across spatial contexts.^{4,5} These mobilities are situated within complex relational networks and are characterized by inherent tensions between fixity

and movement, processes of territorialization and deterritorialization, and the contingent politics of mobility – raising critical questions regarding who is considered (im-)mobile, under what conditions, and to what ends.⁶

In this article, I will discuss these questions – which (im-)mobility, for whom, and when? – by focusing on the case of highly skilled professionals from Turkey who live in the Nordics. Drawing on 71 in-depth life-story interviews conducted between 2020 and 2023 in Finland, Denmark, and Sweden, I elucidate the ‘power geometries’ into which the mobility practices of these highly skilled individuals are embedded. Massey explains that ‘in itself, the term power-geometry does not imply any specific form (any specific geometry). It is a concept through which to analyse the world, in order perhaps to highlight inequalities or deficiencies in democracy. It is in this mode an instrument through which to imagine, and maybe to begin to build, more equal and democratic societies [...]’.⁷ Examining geographies of power-*relations* (italics intended as Massey argues power is always relational) can offer valuable insights into what Canagarajah describes as ‘the dark side of mobility’ – the social, cultural, ethnic, religious, gendered, economic, and political forces that constrain individuals’ capacities, imaginaries, and aspirations for movement.⁸

This article thus foregrounds the significance of power in shaping (im-)mobility by drawing attention to the stratified experiences within the category of

'highly skilled'. Highly skilled individuals are often portrayed as transnational elites with the privilege of global mobility, seamlessly navigating borders due to their expertise, education, and economic value.⁹ However, such representations obscure the hierarchies within the category of 'highly skilled' – based on factors such as citizenship status, race, and country of origin – that shape unequal access to mobility opportunities.¹⁰

As the findings will demonstrate, highly skilled Turkish individuals in the Nordics possess uneven forms of what can be understood as 'motility', i.e. mobility capital¹¹ which refers to individuals' potential for social and geographic mobility based on their access to mobility options, competence to use them and ability to appropriate them according to their needs, aspirations and context. While their immobility is primarily produced by structural inequalities, immobility is also actively employed as a strategic response during critical junctures in the life course, allowing them to negotiate, resist, or subvert the very systems that constrain them.

In the next section, I will further discuss this mobility-immobility nexus in relation to highly skilled migrations.

(IM-)MOBILITIES IN HIGHLY SKILLED MIGRATION

The mobilities paradigm emphasizes movement not merely as a geographical phenomenon but as a fundamental principle that shapes modernity, social relations and professional trajectories.¹² Beyond geographical movement, mobility also encompasses professional, economic, social, temporal, emotional, and symbolic dimensions.¹³ While this article primarily focuses on cross-border geographical mobility, these other dimensions of mobility will provide important insights into how participants experience and navigate periods of immobility.

Professional mobility is associated with frequent travel or temporary relocations to sustain and advance a career,¹⁴ while economic mobility can be upward or downward (in relation to income).¹⁵ Geographical relocation can also lead to changes in

one's social status, resulting in upward or downward social mobility.¹⁶ Temporal mobility concerns the varying durations and rhythms of movement across life stages,¹⁷ while bodily and emotional dimensions highlight the embodied, affective experiences of moving.¹⁸ Symbolic mobility refers to the imagined and perceived potential for movement, shaped by cultural narratives and individual aspirations.¹⁹

These various dimensions of mobility are celebrated particularly in the context of highly skilled migration. In contemporary global economies, international mobility is increasingly framed as both a personal asset and an economic necessity.²⁰ Highly skilled individuals are often portrayed as drivers of innovation and competitiveness; their mobility is seen as crucial for mitigating sectoral labour shortages, addressing demographic shifts, and enabling the transnational circulation of knowledge and expertise.²¹ As such, highly skilled migration is widely endorsed by governments and businesses alike as essential to the reproduction of global capitalism.²² This is reflected in policy discourses that advocate for 'freedom of movement' and 'workforce mobilization', often underpinned by a cosmopolitan ideal.²³

Within this discourse, highly skilled migrants are viewed as possessors of mobility capital – a combination of qualifications, experiences, and linguistic or cultural competencies that ostensibly allow them to move freely across borders. They are positioned as elite, mobile professionals who can transcend the nation-state's regulatory apparatus, embodying a post-national, borderless modernity.

However, this idealized view overlooks hierarchies within the category of 'highly skilled' which are tied to and reproduced by socio-spatial constraints, regulatory barriers, limitations and geopolitical context.²⁴ Moreover, the states that promote the attraction of 'global talent' are simultaneously reinforcing border controls and enacting stricter immigration policies. In recent decades, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden have

actively pursued the recruitment of international highly skilled professionals. However, despite the generally uncontentious nature of such migration in public discourse, these countries have concurrently implemented more restrictive measures concerning access to permanent residency and naturalization.²⁵ These dynamics illustrate what Turner²⁶ identifies as the 'deep contradictions between the economic need for labour mobility and the state's political need to assert political sovereignty'. Tensions become particularly evident in the case of highly skilled Turkish individuals in the EU, whose mobility is not merely shaped by their qualifications or labour market demand, but also by the intersecting power geometries of citizenship, legal regimes, and geopolitical positioning, which unevenly distribute the capacity to move and settle.²⁷

To understand these dynamics, it is necessary to complement the focus on mobilities with a critical attention to immobilities. The immobility perspective offers a critical lens through which to examine the structural conditions that inhibit or restrict movement, challenging earlier assumptions that conceptualize mobility as voluntary, beneficial, and universally accessible across social, legal, and geopolitical contexts.^{28,29} As Salazar and Smart emphasize, '(t)ransnational borders are not singular and unitary, but are designed to encourage various kinds of mobility (business travellers, tourists, migrant workers, students) and discourage others (illegal migrants, refugees)'.³⁰ Hence, immobility should not be understood simply as the absence or suspension of movement, but as a relational and situated outcome of power asymmetries that differentially distribute access to mobility.³¹

In this light, immobility is not merely a deficit or failure; it can also represent a strategic choice or an involuntary condition shaped by broader power structures.³² It is this nuanced understanding that the 'immobility turn' in migration studies seeks to foreground, shifting attention from celebratory accounts of mobility toward a more critical examination of who gets to (or wants to) move, under what terms, and with what consequences.

Nevertheless, while the literature on immobility has predominantly focused on the experiences of refugees, undocumented migrants and low-skilled labourers, it has paid limited attention to the immobilization of highly skilled individuals.³³ However, recent research³⁴ highlights that even within this seemingly privileged group, there are hierarchies and constraints (re-)structured by intersecting identities and state policies.

The following section contextualizes and analyses the conditions under which the post-migration mobilities of highly skilled Turkish individuals are constrained, and how these constraints give rise to forms of periodic, strategic, and involuntary immobility.

TURKISH HIGHLY SKILLED (IM-)MOBILE MIGRATIONS

The experiences of highly skilled Turkish individuals residing in the Nordic countries illustrate the simultaneous embodiment of precarity and privilege, each dynamically shaping their (im-)mobilities across different temporal and spatial contexts. On one hand, as citizens of Turkey – a non-EU country – they are subjected to stringent visa and residence permit procedures, compelling them to meet specific legal criteria through avenues such as study, employment, or family reunification. On the other hand, their substantial educational capital, professional expertise, and transnational networks enable them to navigate these immigration regimes, turning their skills into tangible advantages that facilitate cross-border mobility.

Most participants in this study, originating predominantly from urban centers and educated family backgrounds in Turkey, recounted ambitious educational trajectories marked by aspirations to build global careers. These individual aspirations coincided with Nordic countries' broader strategies to attract 'global talent' to strengthen their competitive standing within the neoliberal global economy.³⁵ They secured residence permits in Sweden, Finland, and Denmark primarily through

acceptance into graduate programs (Master's or PhD) or through employment contracts, underscoring how human capital functions as a form of privilege that enhances their potential and capacity to move across borders. In less frequent cases, participants achieved residence through family reunification by marrying nationals of these countries.

However, participants' mobility trajectories were deeply shaped by a double disillusionment: (i) they witnessed growing anti-immigration discourses in politics, which portrayed immigrants as a threat to the welfare state and were accompanied by the tightening of immigration policies. Although Denmark, Sweden, and Finland adopted nuanced approaches to immigration and integration laws, participants reported feeling the effects of anti-immigration rhetoric and the strengthening of populist parties in all three countries since the 2010s; (ii) the socio-political developments in Turkey, especially following the Gezi Protests of 2013, and the deteriorating democratic environment, coupled with economic instability, led many to perceive Turkey as offering an increasingly precarious future.

Consequently, their residence with Turkish citizenship in the Nordic countries combined with a growing sentiment of having 'no homeland to return to', prompted a reorientation of their migratory goals: rather than pursuing successive transnational opportunities, participants increasingly prioritized long-term settlement in the Nordic countries to eventually secure an EU citizenship. In other words, rather than attempting to continue transnational/international mobility trajectories, they changed their preference to (temporary) immobility.

The narratives of this group further support the argument that power geometries of mobility are closely tied to asymmetries in the neoliberal global labor markets.³⁶ While some individuals move with considerable support, benefits, and choice, others face restrictive contracts and heightened precarity. These discrepancies are often linked to the specific

employment sector and the varying capacities of employers to support international workers. A small minority of participants employed by multinational corporations (in e.g. IT & electronics & communications, banking & finance, pharmaceuticals, engineering) on a permanent basis were generally insulated from legal vulnerabilities, benefiting from corporate visa sponsorship, relocation packages, and structured career advancement opportunities. When asked about their future plans, they often envisioned continued professional mobility, including the possibility of promotion or transfer to corporate branches in other European countries.

Nevertheless, the narratives of participants who relocated elsewhere show that they still prioritized obtaining at least a permanent residence permit – typically acquired after four to five years – in their respective Nordic countries before relocating. Securing this legal status enabled them to move to a new country with the assurance that they could return if needed. One participant in the finance sector migrated to Finland with a permanent job contract following a promotion within her company in Turkey. After several years in Finland, she was able to transfer to other branches abroad. She articulated the rationale behind her temporary and strategic immobility as follows:

I worked in Finland until I gained a permanent residence permit. Then I transferred to the Copenhagen office with a promotion. With my permanent residence permit in Finland, I was able to move to Denmark without going through any visa procedures. As long as I visit Finland once every six months, I can retain my permanent residence permit. Now, in my mid-40s, I observe Turkey and the world, and think that having this [legal] security has been the most important thing.

On the other hand, the participants who moved to the Nordic countries with temporary fixed-term contracts or those working in non-corporate sectors such as academia, arts and culture focused primarily on achieving long-term settlement. For these participants (who make up most of the

sample), resolving the 'passport problem' by securing permanent residence or citizenship in an EU country took precedence over professional or geographical mobility. However, precarious employment conditions are closely intertwined with the production of precarious citizenship.³⁷ As residence permits for third-country nationals in the EU are typically tied to the duration of study programs or employment contracts, the temporary work and project-based positions that initially facilitated participants' relocation to the Nordic countries usually secured only two- or three-year residence permits. To extend their legal status, participants were required to obtain a new employment contract within a limited timeframe which created significant pressure (for instance, under recent Finnish legislation, this gap may not exceed three months). This compelled some participants to accept any available contract-based employment, even if these positions were below their skill level or in an entirely unrelated field.

Some participants navigated periods of short-term employment, which at times hindered their ability to extend residence permits and progress toward citizenship. To address this, some switched their permit types from study or work to marriage or legal cohabitation with a Nordic national as a means of securing extended residence permits. Once their residence permits were secured, they were able to adopt strategies of strategic immobility. One female academic who established a family in Denmark with a Danish partner explained that she prioritized the legal security that Danish citizenship would provide. During the twelve years it took her to obtain citizenship, she deliberately refrained from accepting academic positions abroad or pursuing international visiting researcher opportunities. She reflected:

I stayed in Denmark until I fulfilled the eight years of residence and passed the Danish language and culture tests. Because then, I could go anywhere in Europe for any duration.

A female artist in her 30s, living in Finland, struggled to secure continuous employment.

However, her marriage to a Finnish national allowed her to remain in the country even during periods of unemployment. She had to forgo international artist residency opportunities crucial for her career development and artistic practice because extended stays abroad would have jeopardized her eligibility for Finnish citizenship. She stated the following:

My Finnish peers went for artist residencies abroad for months, but I couldn't because there is a limit to how many days you can be outside of Finland; otherwise, you lose your residence permit and cannot qualify for citizenship. But it was difficult to continue my artistic career [in Finland]. I had to work in several manual jobs just to have a work contract. Because... as you know... you need continuous employment to extend your residence permit and then apply for citizenship. When I married my partner, I had less pressure because my residence permit was not tied to work anymore. Even if I had periods of unemployment, they could not kick me out [of Finland].

As the narratives depicted, the combination of citizenship status and temporary working conditions often results in periods of immobility, containment, and constraint, during which strategic waiting emerges as the most viable option.³⁸ At the same time, the participants' forced or strategic immobility in certain periods of their lives paradoxically constrains the very international and/or transnational ambitions that initially drove their relocation to the Nordics.

Finally, participants who went through the naturalization process experienced forced immobility, which affected their ability to travel for both work and family-related reasons. Applicants for citizenship were allowed to remain in the country while their citizenship applications were being processed; however, they were not permitted to travel abroad during this period. One participant, who was awaiting the completion of his citizenship process, recounted that he was unable to travel to Turkey to attend his father's funeral or be with his family during that time. Participants' narratives

indicate that the waiting period for the finalization of citizenship applications was the longest in Sweden. One participant recalled that it took 31 months for his application to be processed, during which time he was unable to leave the country. He reflected:

My hands were tied. I could not visit Turkey and see my parents. They could not visit me because they are old, but also because it has been getting difficult for Turkish nationals to even get tourist visas [from the EU countries]. The waiting time [for citizenship] felt like jail time. I wanted to travel, do things... I missed some good [professional] training opportunities in (counts several EU countries).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article explored the stratified and constrained forms of mobility among highly skilled Turkish individuals in the Nordics and illustrated that their mobility trajectories and transnational aspirations are persistently shaped and, at times, curtailed by intersecting structures of legality and labor.³⁹ Hence, participants' experiences of (im-)mobility cannot be understood as linear or entirely agency-driven; rather they are part of 'regimes of mobility'⁴⁰ – systems in which access to mobility is unevenly distributed by broader geopolitical and institutional logics.

Periods of involuntary immobility often emerged in the narratives, particularly in relation to precarious employment and citizenship status. Temporary contracts (especially in certain sectors such as academia, arts and culture), coupled with residence permit rules that tie legal status to continuous employment led many to experience geographical, professional and social immobility as an imposed condition.⁴¹ These episodes of legal and material containment demonstrate how immigration policies and labor market precarities intersect to produce 'selective mobility' – where only certain individuals under specific conditions (e.g. those who work in international corporate companies with permanent contracts) can engage

in various forms of mobility whilst others experience forced immobility.⁴²

However, these same constraints also gave rise to instances of strategic immobility. Many participants consciously deferred transnational opportunities, opting instead to remain in place until they secured permanent residence permits or citizenship. These practices align with the concept of strategic waiting, wherein immobility becomes a means to accumulate legal capital even though it can come at a cost of downward social and economic mobility.⁴³

Subsequently, the pursuit of global career opportunities (or sometimes the necessity to move in order to have continuous employment) and the aspiration to establish a secure life in the Nordics create a mobility paradox for highly skilled Turkish individuals: While geographical mobility may serve as a resource for professional advancement, it simultaneously entails the risk of precarious legal status in host countries, hence attaining long-term stability may necessitate periods of immobility. However, the notion of 'periods' – hence the spatiotemporal dimension – is key here, as periods of immobility can also be transformative in the mobility-immobility spectrum⁴⁴ (illustrated by the experience of one participant who moved to Denmark from Finland with a better job prospect after a time of immobility).

Ultimately, these findings demonstrate how the transnational lives of highly skilled migrants are marked by rhythms of acceleration and suspension. Thus, mobility appears not as an inherent privilege of the 'highly skilled' but as a contingent, power-laden process. Depending on the distinct positions these individuals occupy within global flows of capital, labor, and various forms of power, they accumulate varying degrees of mobility capital. Understanding these differentiated (im-)mobilities challenges celebratory discourses of 'global talent circulation' and forces us to confront the enduring structures of inequality embedded in contemporary highly skilled migration and mobility regimes.

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