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Mobility Strategies of Eastern European Immigrants in Spain during the Great Recession

Rafael VIRUELA¹

Abstract

The Great Recession which began in late 2007 is characterised in Spain by the severe destruction of jobs which has affected the immigrant population in particular. To deal with the crisis and its consequences, migrants have used a variety of strategies. The aim of this article is to show the patterns of geographical mobility adopted by Romanian and Bulgarian migrants to lessen the impact of the crisis. Internal and international mobility are considered. The article combines qualitative and quantitative methodology, using data collected by the Spanish National Statistics Institute, the Spanish Ministry of Employment and Social Security and interviews with Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants in Spain and in their countries of origin. The conclusions highlight the significant increase in mobility between Spanish regions in the early years of the crisis, with circular, short term and cyclical displacements in relation to the agricultural season calendar. During the crisis the number of immigrants leaving Spain has increased, but not as much as expected. International migration takes a variety of forms: return, circular migration between the places of origin and destination and emigration to a third country.

Keywords: economic crisis, geographical mobility, Romanian and Bulgarian immigration, Spain.

Introduction

In the early years of the 21st Century, Spain attracted large numbers of immigrants whose numbers have increased from 1.5 million foreign residents in January 2000 to 6.6 million at present (1 January 2013). A large part of immigrants come from Eastern Europe (1.3 million) and from Romania and Bulgaria in particular.

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In a short period of time, Spain became one of the main destinations for emigrants from both these countries (OECD, 2007; European Commission, 2011). There were 3,200 Bulgarians and 7,500 Romanians in Spain in 2000, now there are over 160,000 and 800,000 respectively. This extraordinary increase is mainly due to the broad variety of jobs generated in the Spanish economy and salary differences in relation to the countries of origin. Other factors are also influential, such as difficulties in becoming established in other countries, the rapid strengthening of migratory chains and networks built on family links and geographical or social proximity, a favourable reception from Spanish society and even cultural affinity linked to the Romance language in the case of Romanians (Șerban & Voicu, 2010; Gómez & Molina, 2010; Viruela, 2011). Political and administrative decisions have had a major impact on this migration stream: visa exemptions (May 2001, for Bulgarians, January 2002 for Romanians), agreements on immigration matters and above all the entry of Romania and Bulgaria into the European Union in 2007 (Favell, 2008).

The economic and employment situation has recently experienced an abrupt change. The Great Recession, which started in late 2007, has been particularly severe in Spain, destroying 3.5 million jobs in six years. A total of 5.9 million people are unemployed, equivalent to 25.9% of the working population (first quarter of 2014) compared to 9% in 2007. Foreigners are more affected by unemployment, with a 36.6% unemployment rate, twelve points higher than for the native population (24.3%) with Eastern Europeans among the hardest hit (European Commission, 2011 and 2012). Unemployment is particularly pronounced in males due to their heavy dependence on the construction industry. In contrast, women, with a greater presence in the service industries, have been less affected by the crisis (Munoz, 2012).

The crisis has dashed the expectations of immigrants who have lost their jobs and of their families who have seen their income fall drastically. As has happened in other times and places (Moen & Wethington, 1992; Sirkeci, Cohen & Ratha, 2012), migrants use a variety of strategies (accepting worse conditions of employment, reducing expenditure on consumption and housing, etc.) in order to reduce the gap between family needs and available resources. One of the strategies consists in geographical mobility to seek opportunities that enable them to improve their situation (Massey, 1985; Vertovec, 2007). Social networks play a key role in mobility management (Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006). Migrants opt for a particular destination in relation to the information provided by family and friends, or they take advantage of the presence of members of their network in a given place (Portes & Borocz, 1989; Gurak & Caces, 1992). In this regard, the geographical spread that Bulgarian and Romanian migrants have achieved has become, as Emmanuel Ma Mung (1999) would say, a valuable resource.

The aim of this article is to show the patterns of geographical mobility (the different forms of internal and international mobility) adopted by Romanian and

Bulgarian migrants in the context of the economic and social crisis affecting one of their main destination countries. Both collectives show similar socio-demographic characteristics. For example, the family nature of migration, the relative balance between the sexes (women represent 48% of Bulgarians and 49% of Romanians) and the high representation of young adults (more than half are between 25 and 45 years old), their rapid incorporation in the labour market during the period of economic expansion, men in the construction industry and women in domestic service, a high presence of both sexes in agriculture and broad geographical dispersion in a very short time (Romanians in particular). The highest concentrations of these collectives are, however, in Madrid and the Region of Valencia, with 40% of the total, in addition to Castilla y León in the case of Bulgarians (Figure 1², Figure 2 and Figure 3), related to job and housing opportunities and the presence of support social networks (Viruela, 2008).



Figure 1. *Spain: administrative organization*

² Figure 1 shows the territorial organisation of Spain: fifty provinces, the equivalent to departments in Romania distributed in 17 “self-governing regions” (7 of them single provinces) equivalent to NUTS-2 regions.

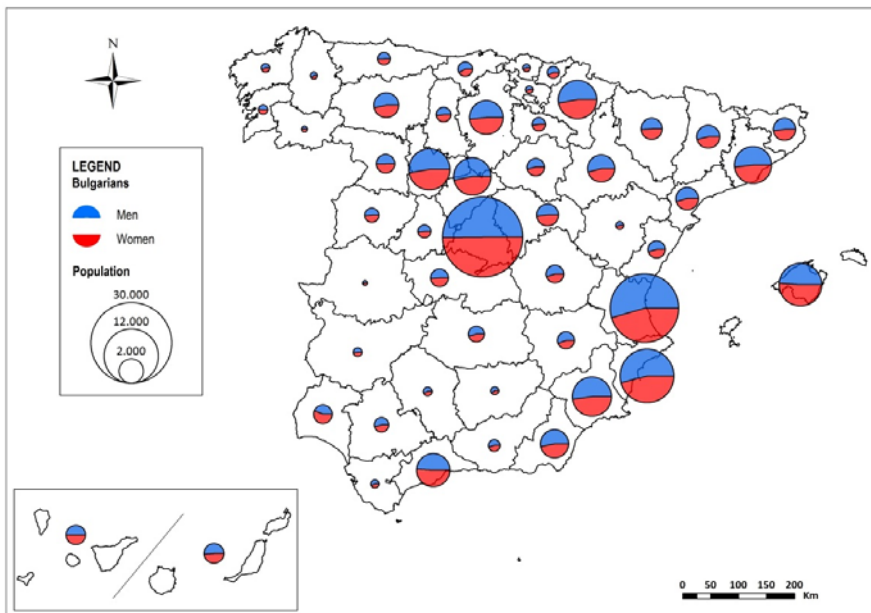


Figure 2. Geographical distribution of the Bulgarian-born population (1st January 2013)
Source: INE (Spanish National Statistics Institute), Municipal Census

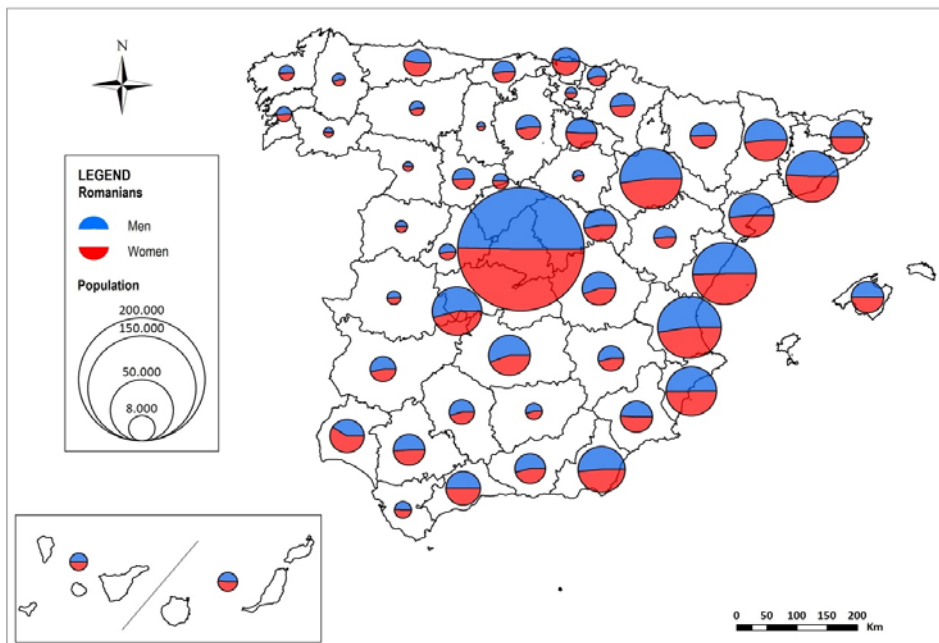


Figure 3. Geographical distribution of the Romanian-born population (1st January 2013)
Source: INE (Spanish National Statistics Institute), Municipal Census

Methodology

This study combines qualitative and quantitative methodology. Internal geographical mobility has been analysed using data gathered by the Spanish National Statistics Institute (henceforth identified by the Spanish acronym, INE) and the Spanish Ministry of Employment and Social Security (henceforth identified by the Spanish acronym, MESS). INE produces residence variation statistics, recording displacements that involve a change in the municipal district of residence (including displacements between municipal districts in the same province) and which, generally, usually affect the entire family. MESS registers the contracts held by workers in provinces different to the province of residence with normally short term, repeated or cyclical displacements which are not accompanied by a change in permanent or main residence and show circulatory mobility in the classical sense of Zelinsky (1971). In both sources of information the measurement unit is not the individual but the migration and a single person may make various displacements over the period of a year. INE does not register all changes of residence and some are declared with many months' delay, whereas MESS only counts legal employment contracts and therefore does not collect all movements either, because the hiring of labour in Spain is subject to extreme irregularity.

Residence Variation Statistics (RVS) can be used to analyse migratory flows with other countries, especially arrivals because the recording of departures is unreliable (Roig & Recaño, 2012), a frequent problem in other countries as well (Lemaitre, 2005). Measuring outflows is particularly difficult in the case of Romanians and Bulgarians as EU citizens are not obliged to renew registration of their residence in Spain every two years. According to employees in the municipal statistics offices these migrants do not usually apply to be taken off the register when they leave, especially when part of the family continues to live in Spain. That is to say, many of those who have left appear as residents in Spain thereby hindering the analysis of emigration. Furthermore, most of those who emigrate do not indicate where they are going.

The qualitative methodology consists in the analysis of in-depth interviews (lasting between one and one and a half hours) with Romanian (41) and Bulgarian immigrants (23) conducted in the first quarter of 2011 in Valencia, Castellon and Madrid and municipalities in the metropolitan area, the main areas of settlement for Eastern European immigrants (*Figure 2* and *Figure 3*). In addition to the above interviews, several months later interviews were conducted at the places of

origin with 12 returned immigrants and 6 family members of emigrants in Ti-ganesti and Bucharest (Romania), and another 10 and 4, respectively, in Vidin, Sofia and Varna (Bulgaria)³.

The questions included in the interviews covered a wide variety of subjects to find out about immigrants' experiences and strategies. After transcribing the interviews the contents were grouped by subjects using ATLAS.ti codification software. This article examines the issues concerning the migrants' situation at the time of the interviews in order to evaluate the strategies interviewees adopted to deal with the serious and persistent crisis affecting the Spanish labour market.

Results and discussion

Significant increase in interior circular migration for agricultural work

Despite the duration and intensity of the crisis in Spain, most Eastern Europeans have decided to stay for a variety of reasons. Some have seen social and employment improvement; others, although they have lost their jobs, consider they are better off in Spain than in their country and do not find sufficient reasons to return because:

In Romania if you work for one month you can barely survive for one week... and here if you work a week you can live for a month. [That is why] despite the crisis, things are better here (Male, Romanian, 24 years old).

Bulgaria is worse [than Spain] When I went last time, everything was more expensive, the price of food, everything. A supermarket cashier earns 200 Euros and electricity is more expensive than it is here. Rents [for property] are cheaper, but food is sky high, I don't know how people get by (Female, Bulgarian, 41 years old).

In general, migrants acknowledge that they are better off in Spain than in their countries of origin. To reduce the impacts of the crisis they adopt a variety of strategies, some in the reproductive sphere: they save all they can, reduce expenditure on consumption, housing and on the money they send home; and others in the productive sphere: family members who are out of work actively look for jobs and those who have lost a job try to find work in another sector of activity or in another place.

³ The interviews form part of the work carried out as part of the R+D+i project: *Migraciones de la Europa del Este a España en el contexto geopolítico fronterizo: movilidad circulatoria y retorno*, financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Ref. CSO2010-14870, 2011-2013).

INE registered high internal geographical mobility, understood as changes in municipal districts of residence during the period of economic expansion (*Table 1*). These displacements have fallen by half since the crisis began: in 2007, 112 out of every 1,000 Romanians and Bulgarians changed their place of residence in Spain and in recent years just over 50 have done so. This is because the crisis is affecting all Spanish regions to some extent or other.

Table 1. *Interior residential mobility according to place of birth (2001-2013)*

Year	Bulgaria		Romania	
	Movements	Rate	Movements	Rate
2001	1,594	74.80	5,280	103.93
2002	6,030	144.26	14,972	145.08
2003	7,852	126.90	21,154	122.91
2004	9,288	113.73	27,945	107.79
2005	10,938	112.92	38,050	107.28
2006	12,343	111.74	48,516	106.83
2007	15,198	112.21	68,184	112.04
2008	10,440	67.20	46,927	63.92
2009	9,243	57.14	43,230	55.78
2010	8,914	54.15	44,330	55.58
2011	9,079	54.40	45,504	55.35
2012	9,081	55.32	42,146	51.55
2013	8,323	55.04	39,410	51.63

Source: *INE, Residence Variation Statistics*

The rate expresses the number of movements per 1000 inhabitants.

Despite the drastic reduction in residence mobility, a large number of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants are moving around and travelling to other provinces to look for work. According to MESS, the number of contracts occupied by Eastern European workers in provinces other than their province of residence almost doubled between 2007 and 2011 (*Table 2*). Employment mobility that does not involve a change of residence, at least officially, is the solution adopted by thousands of migrants to alleviate the impact of the crisis. The figures have become smaller in recent times, but the proportion of those working outside their province remains at around 20-22% and the participation of women is increasing,

with women making a third or more of the inter-provincial displacements for employment reasons recorded in recent years.

Table 2. *Contracts in provinces other than the province of residence (2007-2013)*

Year	Bulgarians			Romanians		
	Contracts	MR*	% of women	Contracts	MR*	% of women
2007	13,066	15.6	23.5	59,387	16.6	28.1
2008	13,345	16.4	25.8	64,731	17.2	29.6
2009	15,192	17.5	28.8	90,264	18.9	31.3
2010	18,885	20.9	29.3	117,112	21.8	30.1
2011	19,985	21.5	29.1	117,852	22.6	31.4
2012	18,179	18.7	33.8	96,828	20.3	34.8
2013	18,893	20.7	33.4	103,198	22.7	35.0

Source: *MESS, Statistical Department of the Employment Observatory*

* *MR: mobility rate as a percentage of contracts in provinces other than the province of residence in relation to total contracts held by each collective*

The geographical mobility of foreign workers registered by MESS is related mainly with the agricultural sector. Agriculture has been, together with construction, in the case of men, and domestic service in the case of women, one of the main gateways for immigrants to the Spanish labour market, which they try to abandon as soon as possible (Colectivo Ioé & Fernández, 2010). In recent years, many of those who lost jobs in construction, industry and services have sought refuge in agriculture and have become itinerant labourers participating in different agricultural seasons. Seasons attracting the largest contingents include the olive harvest in Andalusia and Extremadura; garlic and onion and grape harvest in Castilla-la Mancha; citrus fruits in the Valencia region and Murcia; fruit in Catalonia and Aragon; strawberry growing in nurseries in Segovia and harvesting the fruit in Huelva. The harvesting seasons require plentiful labour concentrated in a very short time. For this reason, the strategy of mobile workers consists in linking up with different seasons in different provinces in order to remain in employment most of the year. Migrants often follow a time-place sequence, determined by the opportunities on the local job markets, which repeats itself year after year giving rise to circular migration displacements.

Between 2007 and 2011 (the year with the highest number of displacements) the migratory space of Bulgarian and Romanian workers increased and flows

between provinces in close geographical proximity which concentrate a higher number of displacements were joined by other displacements over longer distances (*Figure 4 and Figure 5*). The most important itineraries occur between the provinces with the main settlements of immigrants (*Figure 2 and Figure 3*) and show the circular nature of internal labour migration. Geographical mobility is supported by a broad social network dispersed throughout a large number of municipal districts and provinces. Workers have detailed information on the time of year and duration of agricultural seasons from previous visits or because it is provided by known people who live in the places they go to and who offer them logistical support. In some agricultural seasons, Romanians and Bulgarians resident in Spain are joined by compatriots who have been working in other countries (France, Italy or Greece as well as Romania and Bulgaria).

There are two reasons for the recent reduction in Romanian and Bulgarian workers' inter-provincial mobility (*Table 2*). Firstly, business owners in the industry offer employment to Spanish people who have lost their jobs in industry or construction, especially if they are known to them, in keeping with the "preference for nationals" in hiring. Furthermore, there has been an increase in emigration in recent years.

Increased international mobility

The economic crisis in Spain has had a severe impact on external migrations. Inflows plummeted in the early years of the crisis, whereas outflows have increased gradually. Emigration already exceeds immigration and the stock of residents in Spain is decreasing. According to INE, in the last two years the Bulgarian community has fallen by 25,000 and the Romanian by more than 100,000. According to one interviewee:

There aren't as many Romanians as in 2007 because some went back because there is no work. Many had work before, but then they lost their jobs and people went back or they went to other countries (Male, Romanian, 29 years old).

Several thousand migrants have left Spain in response to the economic crisis. Between 2008 and 2013, INE certified over 41,000 and 200,000 outflows of Bulgarians and Romanians respectively (*Table 3*). Entire families have emigrated but in particular a high proportion of males between the ages of 25 and 45 (*Figure 5*). Statistical information on the destination country is very deficient as it is not known in 83-84% of cases. Of the rest, we know that the majority have returned to their country of origin, just over 15% of Romanians and Bulgarians who have left Spain in recent years.

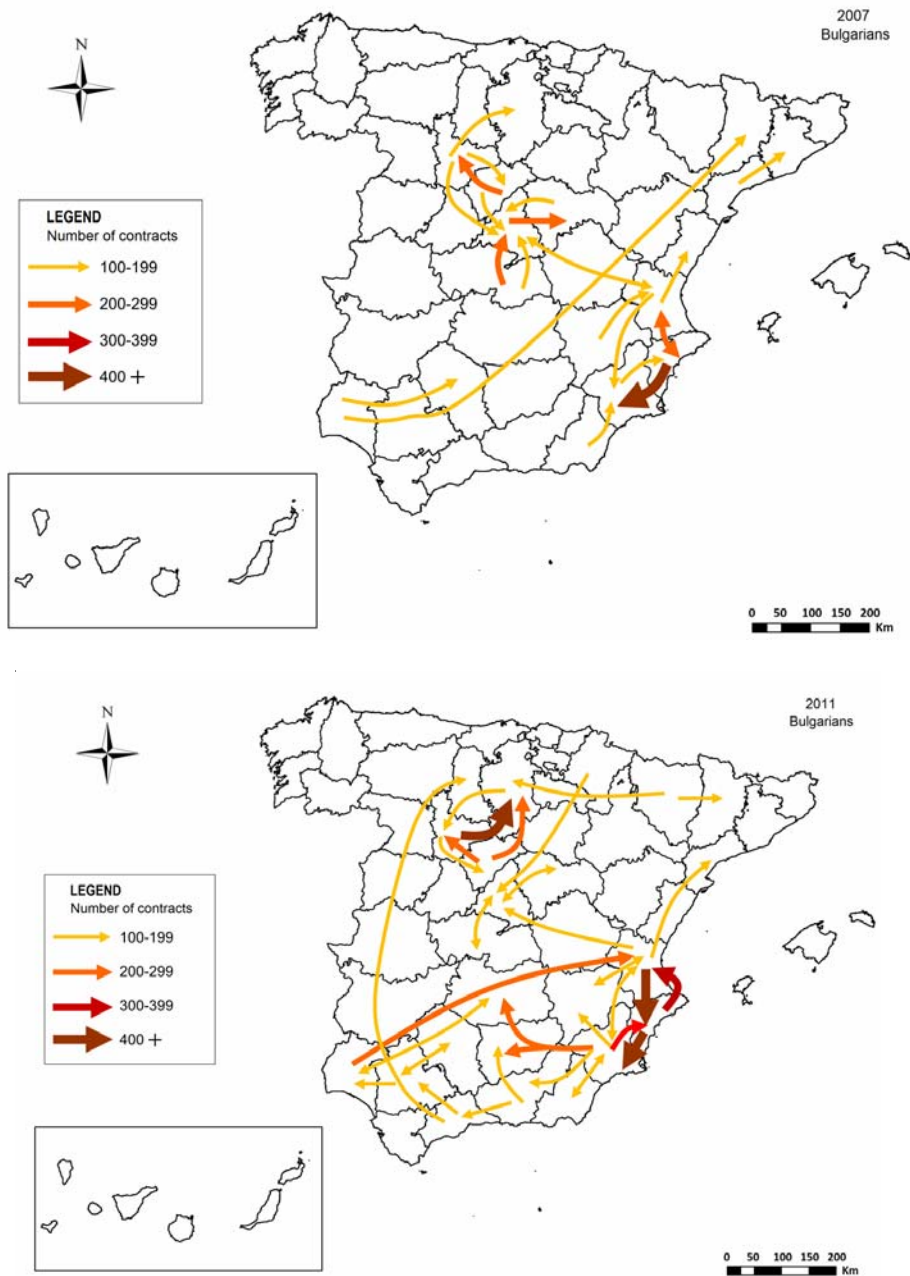


Figure 4. Main inter-provincial flows of Bulgarian workers in 2007 and 2011

Source: MESS, Statistics Department of the Employment Observatory. Flows involve 100 or more contracts in provinces other than the province of residence

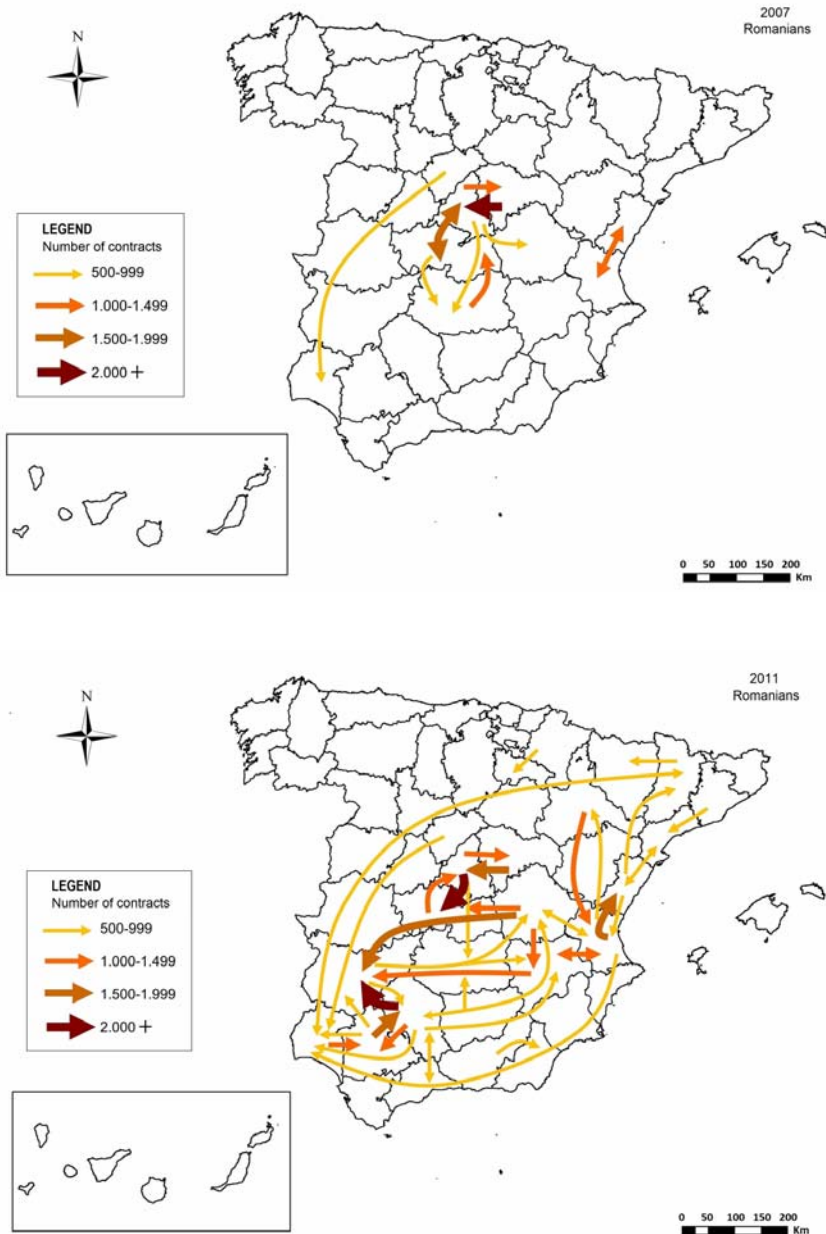


Figure 5. Main inter-provincial flows of Romanian workers in 2007 and 2011

Source: MESS, Statistical Department of the Employment Observatory. Flows involve 500 or more contracts in provinces other than the province of residence

Table 3. Outflows of Bulgarian and Romanian-born migrants according to destination (2008-2013)

Year	Bulgaria				Romania			
	Return	Other known destination	Unknown destination	Total	Return	Other known destination	Unknown destination	Total
2008	1,191	51	1,317	2,559	5,584	155	8,060	13,799
2009	1,201	75	3,655	4,931	5,335	140	19,955	25,430
2010	1,031	65	6,392	7,488	4,650	189	28,401	33,240
2011	940	81	7,745	8,766	4,801	218	30,210	35,229
2012	1,182	93	6,236	7,511	4,987	227	30,468	35,682
2013	1,037	72	9,229	10,338	5,205	260	52,971	58,436
Total	6,582	437	34,574	41,593	30,562	1,189	170,065	201,816
% (1)	15.8	1.1	83.1	100.0	15.1	0.6	84.3	100.0

Source: INE, Residence Variations Statistic (microdata)

(1) % of the total of each collective

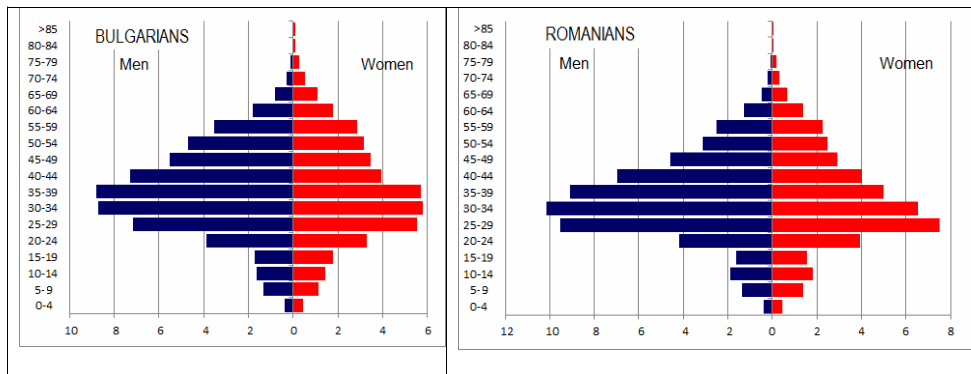


Figure 6. Structure by sex and age of migrants who left Spain in 2013

Source: INE, Residence Variations Statistics

In general, the people most affected by the recession, young people with short employment histories in Spain, the unemployed with reinsertion difficulties and who have exhausted benefits and subsidies, those with less dense social networks and families, consider that “it is time to go back home”, where they can subsist with fewer resources:

With 100 Euros from here, over there we can get by for longer because in the villages the cost of living is cheaper, especially in our region [Neamt] (Male, Romanian, 24 years old).

Some take refuge in rural areas and work on small family farms that provide them with products for self-consumption. Others, in view of the lack of a robust wages system, become self-employed, investing their savings in a small business. Frequently, however, the return is provisional because those who go back to their country may consider leaving again if their expectations are not met, especially if they have family members, relations and contacts abroad:

In principle, I went back to stay and I opened a business, a stationery shop in Bucharest. At the moment, things aren't going as I would like them to, but at least I'm trying. My idea is to live in my country, but I will only do that if circumstances help me and the crisis goes away. In fact, my husband and one of my sons stayed in Spain. I came back with my other son and the good thing is that I can move when I want and go back to Spain if my business does not take off (Woman, Romanian, 52 years old).

Table 4. Main destination countries for Bulgarian and Romanian migrants (2008-2013)

Bulgaria				Romania			
Destination country	No. of movements			Destination country	No. of movements		
	Males	Females	Total		Males	Females	Total
Germany	34	39	73	Germany	122	116	238
United Kingdom	23	30	53	Italy	108	121	229
Romania	31	22	53	France	73	46	119
France	17	15	32	United Kingdom	57	40	97
Italy	12	17	29	Portugal	44	31	75
Greece	7	18	25	Belgium	30	33	63
Portugal	13	12	25	Morocco	24	12	36
USA	9	10	19	Austria	17	17	34
Belgium	10	7	17	Moldavia	17	13	30
Holland	7	6	13	Bulgaria	10	12	22
Other countries	49	49	98	Other countries	118	128	246
TOTAL	212	225	437	TOTAL	620	569	1,189

Source: INE, *Residence Variations Statistic (microdata)*

People emigrating to third countries are in the minority but numbers are increasing (“other known destination” in *Table 3*). Bulgarians and Romanians prefer other Western European countries as a destination such as Germany, Italy

and the United Kingdom (*Table 4*). This choice is determined by the migrant's direct knowledge through previous visits before arrival in Spain and the presence of relations and friends. EU legislation is a stimulus for seeking opportunities in other European Union countries as it offers three months' unemployment benefits for migrants who move to look for work⁴. Emigration to a third country is a possibility contemplated especially by young people with university studies because salaries are very low in their places of origin and in Spain in the current circumstances they have severe difficulties in accessing the qualified labour market.

Together with return and emigration to a third country, migrants' strategies include alternating periods in Spain with periods in their own country. Community status permits free movement, which the interviewees value positively, despite the restrictions on access to the labour market imposed by the Spanish government (on Romanians and Bulgarians in 2007 and 2008 and on Romanians from July 2011 to December 2013). Given the difficulties of returning permanently, Bulgarian and Romanian migrants prefer and practice circulatory migration consisting in frequent comings and goings between their places of origin and destination.

People went back and came again. People are like... on the road. It's like a circuit. People go back to Romania, use up their savings and come back again (Male, Romanian, 23 years old)

People went back, but not for ever. People [without work] can't pay the rent, they can't eat and they move more than before (Male, Bulgarian, 30 years old).

European citizenship is a "passport" that gives the right to mobility, but displacements respond to the difficult economic and employment situation which prevents migrants from settling in one place. Comings and goings between places of origin and destination are relatively frequent and are used to explore the scanty opportunities offered by the markets in both places and if possible to do temporary work. Thus, for example, one interviewee works half the year in construction and agriculture in Spain and stays in Romania for the other six months, building his house in which he has invested most of his savings. In other cases, migrants return temporarily to take care of ageing parents or children like several Bulgarian women in the same family network:

We, that is, me, my mother and my sister, we take turns to work in Spain, looking after an old woman. Now I am here, but then my mother will come and then my sister. Because in that way, we know that our children, who stayed in Bulgaria are looked after and we also get to spend some months of the year with them (Woman, Bulgarian, 30 years old).

⁴ For further information see the conference given by László Andor at the University of Bristol on 10 February 2014. Available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-115_en.htm

Conclusion

The serious deterioration in the labour market and the persistent nature of the crisis has had a severe impact on migrations. A growing minority of Eastern Europeans who came to Spain during the period of economic expansion are choosing to emigrate. Although there are cases of families where all the members have emigrated, it is more usual for the unemployed male-head of family to migrate while the wife remains in Spain with the children. Statistical information and interview results show that external migration takes a variety of forms: return, emigration to a third country and circular migration between origin and destination countries.

Permanent or prolonged return is a marginal phenomenon, but could increase if the employment situation in Spain does not change substantially and in particular as women find it difficult to keep their jobs or as unemployment benefits disappear. However, the decision to return depends mainly on socio-economic circumstances in the country of origin, where the possibilities of obtaining a job that satisfies migrants' progress and remuneration objectives are scanty. Migrants contemplate return from the perspective of mobility because many of those who return in fact circulate, they come and go and may consider future migrations if their plans and expectations are not fulfilled. According to the interviewees there appears to be a significant increase in circulatory migration between the places of origin and destination, which is not possible to quantify. Emigration to a third country is a minority option but is increasing, with a preference for European destinations due to geographical proximity, good transport links and the mobility opportunities the European Union offers its citizens.

Most Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants, like immigrants from elsewhere, are dealing with the crisis in Spain by adopting a variety of strategies to reduce the impact, including inter-provincial labour mobility which, according to the Spanish Ministry of Employment and Social Security, has risen significantly during the crisis. The recent reduction in internal mobility may be related to the preference for hiring Spanish nationals or to increased outflows.

In short, the different types of mobility strategies highlight how difficult it is currently for migrants to settle in one place. The accumulated experience and information provided by family and friends influence the choice of destinations, the paths followed and the timing of displacement. The geographical spread Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants have achieved in Spain and other European countries has become a valuable resource that facilitates mobility, as migrants attempt to make the most of the scanty opportunities currently on offer in local labour markets.

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