The social networks of European migrants with a native partner in Belgium and the Netherlands

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Abstract

Although intra-European migration is often considered relatively easy to realize given European citizens’ right to freedom of movement, settlement in another European country can still be experienced as socially disruptive. Insights in the insertion processes of European migrants, nevertheless, remain rather scarce. In this study, we analyse the social networks of European nationals with a native partner in Belgium and the Netherlands. The analysis is based on survey data from the EUMARR project (n = 576). First, we study the size and composition of European migrants’ local family and friendship networks as well as frequency of contact with these networks. Second, we connect intra-EU movers’ insertion routes to investments in transnational networks in their home country. The results reveal how size, composition and contact with the local and transnational network change over time. Children help to maintain contact with both the local and transnational family network and form a bridge to meet own friends in the host country. Moreover, having own friends and own family around matters for contact frequency with the local networks.


Introduction

The number of Europeans living in another European member state significantly increased in recent decades, from 5.5 million in 1990 to 13.7 million in 2014 (Castro-Martín and Cortina
Today, European migrants form an important share of the foreign population in many European countries, representing about 40 per cent of the total migrant population in the European Union (EU) (Castro-Martín and Cortina 2015). Furthermore, the reasons for migration within the EU are becoming increasingly diverse (King 2002). Apart from economic motivations, people now increasingly move within the EU for education, lifestyle and retirement as well as for love and relationships (e.g. Gilmartin and Migge 2015; Recchi 2008; Santacreu et al. 2009; Verwiebe 2014). Nevertheless, migration scholars have largely neglected intra-European migration, except East-West migration, and the migration experience of European immigrants has yet received surprisingly little attention in academic studies (Castro-Martín and Cortina 2015; Polek, Wöhrle and van Oudenhoven 2010; Recchi 2015). This is partly because intra-European migration movements are generally evaluated in more positive terms. Intra-EU mobility would, for example, enhance a more integrated and efficient European economy (Recchi 2015) and increase Europe’s competitiveness among global knowledge economies (Van Mol 2014). Furthermore, the movement of European citizens within the European Union can be considered easier to realize compared to migration from outside the EU. After all, European citizens’ right to freedom of movement entails that they are not subjected to, for example, visa legislations (Favell 2008; Recchi 2015). Consequently, they might face less institutional barriers. Nevertheless, intra-European migration can also be experienced as socially disruptive, as it implies a reformulation of movers’ social networks in the countries of origin and destination. The few existing studies on specific groups of intra-EU movers such as highly skilled migrants and students, indeed suggest that these international migrants also experience adjustment processes and encounter significant obstacles when trying to settle in the host country (Ciupiuju 2011; Favell 2008; Kennedy 2008; Ryan and Mulholland 2014a; c; Van Mol and Michielsen 2015).
As in migration sociology there is a longstanding interest in the role of social networks in migration processes (e.g. Petersen 1958; Thomas and Znaniecki 1918), it is somewhat surprising that intra-EU movers’ social networks have not yet been subject of study. Most European studies consider migration- and insertion processes of non-EU migrants (e.g. van Tubergen 2014), neglecting the substantial number of intra-EU movers. Although in recent years some progress has been made in advancing our understanding of the functioning of European migrants’ social networks (e.g. Ryan 2007; Ryan and Mulholland 2014 b; c; Van Mol and Michielsen 2015), our knowledge on this group of migrants is still extremely limited. Moreover, the vast majority of studies into migration and social networks focus on the impact of social networks on migration decisions (e.g. Boyd 1989; Massey and Espinosa 1997) or the functions social networks fulfil in the society of arrival in terms of, for example, finding a job (e.g. Cook, Dwyer and Waite 2011) and housing (e.g. Gill and Bialski 2011). There has been less attention for the distribution of social capital as well as access to, size and composition of social networks across different ethnic groups (van Tubergen 2014; Völker, Pinkster and Flap 2008).

Our paper aims to further improve our understanding of intra-European migrants and their social embeddedness through an analysis of the local and transnational social networks of intra-EU movers with a native partner in Belgium and the Netherlands. Native partners can provide the migrant with more interethnic contacts (Martinovic, van Tubergen and Maas 2009; Schaeffer 2013), as they are the link to in-laws and host country friends (Lubbers et al. 2010). The native partner can thus constitute a privileged bridge towards the society of destination, representing easy and quick access to the social networks and economic resources of that society (Gaspar 2009). Drawing on a unique survey on European bi-national couples, EUMARR, we aim to advance scientific knowledge in three ways. First, we extend the study of migrant social network formation to the context of intra-EU mobility. Second,
we investigate the relationships between network size, network composition and frequency of contact with the local and transnational networks. Third, we analyse local and transnational family and friendship networks simultaneously. This is important, as ‘it is very difficult to grasp the functional and structural features of one set of relationships without information on the other’ (Widmer 2004: 357). Furthermore, the EUMARR-survey allows to differentiate throughout the analyses between both a migrant’s own family and in-laws as well as personal friendships and friends met through the partner. As such, the analysis sheds light on different network types as well as their interrelations.

Background

Social embeddedness and social network reconstruction in a migration context

Korinek, Entwisle and Jamapaklay (2005) define social embeddedness as the social relationships that foster a sense of rootedness and integration. Many authors have pointed to the positive effects of social embeddedness (e.g. Coleman 1988; Granovetter 1992; Korinek et al. 2005; Langford et al. 1997; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). Socially embedded individuals can rely on group solidarity and informal social support for the pursuit of their personal goals. The social relationships in which they are engaged ensure access to practical resources. Social embeddedness, furthermore, is considered a necessary condition for an individual’s successful personal development, social integration and political participation in society. Nevertheless, several authors also pointed to the flipside of social embeddedness. Possible negative consequences of social embeddedness are linked to social pressure and social control (e.g. Breton 1964; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). However, it should be noted that positive and negative consequences of social embeddedness often exist alongside, even within one ethnic community, due to the existence of subgroups within such communities (Roggeveen and Van Meeteren 2013).
Migration can be expected to have a disruptive effect on social embeddedness (Coleman 1990). On the one hand, existing social networks become spatially stretched and fragmented when individuals move to another country, and new social networks are generally constructed in the society of arrival. These new networks fulfil an important function, operating ‘as a temporary ‘substitute’ for family and friends left behind’ (Kennedy 2004: 176). On the other hand, migration can strengthen social ties as migrants’ existing networks do not necessarily dissolve, but are rather preserved in a modified form (Levitt 2001). Networks are hence no longer localized, and migrants become embedded within a transnational network where solidarity and trust operate, linking multiple localities (Zontini 2004). With the increased possibilities of communication across international borders and relatively cheap and accessible transportation within Europe, it can be argued that the possibilities to keep up with social networks that are spatially fragmented across Europe are abundant today.

In a migration context, contact with the majority population is often considered to be crucial for the social integration of non-nationals in the host society (Völker, Pinkster and Flap 2008). Putnam (2000) differentiated between ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital and pointed to the importance of bridging ties when studying immigrants’ integration. Ties with the local population in migrants’ social network would serve as a bridge to integration and would result in a better position in the host society (de Miguel Luken and Tranmer 2010). Nevertheless, migrants often face significant problems in establishing meaningful links with the local population (e.g. Ryan 2011). Most studies into social network composition of migrants focus on migrants arriving alone or with their family. Little is known, however, on social network reconstruction of international migrants that have a native partner, and even less so on intra-EU movers who are in a union with a native. As a result, the overview of relevant literature for studying European migrants’ social networks in the next sections of this
The evolution of local and transnational social networks in a migration context

In the initial phases of migration, contacts with family and friends in the home-country (Levrau et al. 2014) and co-ethnics in the destination country (Gill and Bialski 2011) are generally important for both practical and emotional support. During the first phases of migration, moreover, the overall social network generally shrinks (Bidart and Lavenu 2005) and contact with the local population often remains limited (Domínguez and Maya-Jariego 2008). Over time, however, networks evolve, as the time an individual spends in a certain context influences the probability of establishing, continuing and discontinuing social relationships (Mollenhorst et al. 2014). The longer a migrant stays in the host country, the more likely he/she establishes new friendships, so over time social networks become heterogeneous, including members of the local population (Domínguez and Maya-Jariego 2008; Kennedy 2008; Lubbers et al. 2010). How migrants balance contacts within local and transnational networks is less clear. With an increasing share of autochthonous friends, EU-movers might become increasingly fluent in the host country language (Martinovic et al 2009; Vervoort et al. 2011). This increased fluency in the host country language may stimulate and facilitate contact with other members of the host population (Martinovic 2013; Martinovic et al. 2009). An increasing share of native friends might thus be related to more frequent contact with family and friends in the host country.

Furthermore, migration duration shows to be linked to a decrease in the frequency of contact with social networks in the home-country (e.g. Hedberg and Kepsu 2008; Levrau et al. 2014). Migration particularly affects dispersed friendships and extended family ties (Eve 2008; Mollenhorst et al. 2014; Viry 2012), mainly because maintaining relations requires an
active effort and time (Ryan and Mulholland 2014b). Earlier work showed that ‘the combination of the obligation to help kin, and the high level of structural embeddedness means that kin are both cognitively and time-wise less demanding relationships to maintain than non-kin relationships’ (Roberts et al. 2009: 139), especially in a migration context. Research among European migrants confirms this, as intra-EU movers show to particularly stay in touch with their close family and friends (Morosanu 2013; Ryan and Mulholland 2014a), and the longer they live abroad, the more connections with the home country diminish (Morosanu 2013).

Migration duration, however, also influences the composition of familial networks in the host country. The longer a migrant stays in a country, the more likely a larger family network is present in the host country as well (Boyd 1989), as migrants often tend to reunify their families, or start forming families themselves. Furthermore, when a large group of kin (relatives from the home country as well as in-laws) is geographically close, there is logically more interaction with this group (Mulder and Cooke 2009; Schweizer, Schnegg and Berzborn 1998). In addition, when the core family is present in the host country, contact with the transnational network shows to decrease (Rodríguez and Egea 2006). Conversely, migrants who do not dispose of kin relationships in the host country rely more on ethnic networks, which can act as a substitute (Nee and Sanders 2001).

**Relationship and background characteristics**

There are several background characteristics found in the literature that show to be related to the size and composition of individuals’ social networks.

First, several studies indicate that children often have a bridging function for establishing contact with the local population, as they provide extra meeting opportunities at, for example, school entrances or playing grounds (Levrau et al. 2014; Ryan 2007; 2011;
Ryan et al. 2008; Ryan and Mulholland 2014b; Schaeffer 2013). Nevertheless, contrasting findings have also been reported. A case study of French migrants in London by Ryan and Mulholland (2014c) showed, for example, that children can also curb interaction, as some parents deliberately established contacts with other co-national parents (Ryan and Mulholland 2014c). Furthermore, parents show to become more engaged in friendship networks within the neighbourhood (Moore 1990; Kalmijn 2012). As parents become involved in new neighbourhood networks as well as have increased opportunities to meet fellow parents through the networks of their children (Munch et al. 1997), it can be expected that there is a positive relationship between the number of children, the size of friendship networks and frequency of contact with friends in the host society. Furthermore, given the establishment of such new relationships, it can be expected that children increase the share of own friends in respondents’ network. Furthermore, it has been reported that children simultaneously increase frequency of contact with the family (Bost et al. 2002; Fischer and Oliker 1983; Munch et al. 1997), as the need for help with caring tasks might rise with the number of children in the couple (Kennedy 2008; Silverstein and Marenco 2001), and parents often want their children to be in touch with their roots (Levrau et al. 2014; Rodriguez and Egea 2006).

Second, relationship duration can also be expected to play a role in the social network composition of intra-EU movers. After all, it has been demonstrated that there is a negative association between the duration of a marriage and the size of a friendship network (Fischer and Oliker 1983; Wellman et al. 1997). Over the life-course, friendship networks of couples show to shrink and become overlapping, as partners provide access to each other’s network (e.g. Bidart and Lavenu 2005; Kalmijn 2003; Viry 2012).

Based on this literature reviewed, we expect to find empirical evidence for the model presented in figure 1. This model forms the basis for our empirical analyses presented hereafter.
Methods and data

Data

This paper uses the international comparative EUMARR-survey data. This unique survey collected data among European bi-national couples and (native) uni-national couples in EUMARR in 2012-2013. The EUMARR-project aims to measure trends in bi-national unions between citizens of the European Union and examines the extent to which these bi-national couples have a different lifestyle and worldview. Therefore, the survey collected data on respondents’ personal and family background, international experiences, social networks, tastes, identity and political and social engagement. Bi-national couples were defined as
couples consisting of one native and one European partner; uni-national couples as couples consisting of two native partners. All respondents in the survey were between 30 and 45 years old at the time of the survey (with an average of 38 years). The choice for this particular age range was informed by the aim to have a homogeneous sample, including only respondents who started their unions well after the establishment of freedom of movement as a fundamental right for European citizens. This age range also meant that migration histories and experiences were more recent and thus less affected by recall error than would have been the case for older people. The lower age limit was established as for the different case-countries in the project this is the age when most individuals have entered a stable union but levels of re-partnering are still limited.

In this paper, we use pooled data from two neighbouring countries, namely Belgium ($n = 805$) and the Netherlands ($n = 918$). The data was collected through online and paper questionnaires in four internationally oriented cities: The Hague and Amsterdam in the Netherlands, and Antwerp and Brussels in Belgium. The selection of urban settings was motivated by concerns of comparability in the international project, as well as the fact that more European migrants live in large cities. The Antwerp sample and both Dutch samples were drawn randomly from the respective Municipal Population Registers; the Brussels sample from the National Population Register. For each sample, married and cohabiting couples were selected based on the current nationality and age of the partners, after which one partner per couple was randomly chosen as (potential) respondent. Response rates across both countries were roughly similar, namely 32.2 per cent in Belgium, and 37.1 per cent in the Netherlands.

As we aim unravelling the structure of the social networks of European individuals who migrated to another country, a distinction based on country of birth rather than nationality is relevant. Therefore, we focus on European nationals in bi-national couples who
are foreign born, and whose local partner is native born ($n = 244$ for Belgium and $n = 332$ for the Netherlands). The mean age of migration for the foreign-born European nationals is 26, even if some moved to Belgium as a child. The Europeans in the Belgian survey belong to six nationalities, namely Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Polish, representing the most frequent nationalities in European bi-national marriages in Belgium. The Dutch survey had no restriction on (European) nationality in the sample. Here, German, English, French, Belgian, Spanish, Italian and Polish account for 70 per cent of all European nationals in the survey.

Sixty-six per cent of the European migrants in our sample are women (58 per cent in the Belgian survey and 72 per cent in the Dutch survey). The sample is also relatively high educated: 64 per cent of respondents in the Belgian survey have at least a master degree. In the Dutch survey, 57 per cent obtained such degree. Although no register data on education of European migrants is available to compare our sample composition to, relatively high levels of education are also reported in other surveys that include European migrants. For example, results of the Labour Force Survey in Belgium show that 45 per cent of mobile Europeans finished tertiary education as compared to 26 per cent of the native population (Martiniello et al. 2010), and the assessment survey on the effects of EU-migration to Amsterdam reports that 68 per cent of EU migrants finished tertiary education (Booi et al. 2013). In addition, it has been reported that overall, mobile citizens from the EU15 have higher education levels compared to the nationals averages of both their country of origin and destination (Recchi 2015). Finally, 83 per cent of the European migrants in our sample are employed.

Variables
The variables used in the analysis can be divided into three categories, namely (1) migration; (2) couple characteristics; and (3) network characteristics.

The migration history is covered by a continuous variable indicating the number of years since migration to the host country.

The couple characteristics include two continuous variables. First, the number of years since the start of the relationship. Second, the number of children in the current relationship.

Given our research question we focus on different dimensions of the respondents’ networks in our analyses. A first continuous variable indicates the number of family members living in the host country. Family members are defined as siblings, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces of the respondents or the partner. The variable has an upper limit of ‘more than 10’. A second variable indicates the share of own relatives in this local family network in percentages.

Several variables measure the local friendship network. A first continuous variable indicates the total number of close friends in the host country with an upper limit of ‘11 or more friends’. Close friends are defined as people one feels at ease with, one can talk to about what is on one’s mind, or call up for help. A second variable indicates the percentage of own friends among the core friendship group, pointing to friends that were not met via or introduced by the partner. Respondents had to provide this information for a maximum of five closest friends. A third variable indicates the percentage of native friends among the core friendship group, measured by the country of birth. We do not use the distinction between co-ethnic friends and friends of other foreign origin here, as friendship networks of intra-EU movers appear to evolve around people in the same situation, not necessarily taking into account ethnicity as a criterion for inclusion in the social network (e.g. Morosanu 2013). We
do, however, take the share of native friends in the local friendship network into account as such relationships often prove difficult to be established (e.g. Van Mol and Michielsen 2015).

Finally, we include three factor score scales, indicating frequency of contact with the different networks, based on five items (four for transnational networks, three for local networks), measuring (1) transnational visits; (2) received transnational visits, (3) face-to-face contact, (4) telephone contact and (5) written contact. Respondents could rate each of these items from 1 ‘rarely or never’ to 8 ‘daily’. The inclusion of diverse modes of contact is essential, as alternatives to face-to-face interactions are an important way of keeping in touch with family and friends (Widmer 2004). A first score indicates frequency of contact with the local family network (Cronbach $\alpha = .78$), a second frequency of contact with the transnational family network (Cronbach $\alpha = .74$), a third with the local network of friends (Cronbach $\alpha = .82$), and a fourth with the transnational network of friends (Cronbach $\alpha = .69$).

**Analytic Strategy**

We apply Structural Equation Modelling (path analysis) for analysing the social networks of intra-EU movers in a binational union. These models allow to study relationships between (1) the local network of family and the local network of friends of European migrants in the migration country; (2) the different dimensions of these local social networks (size, composition and frequency of contact); and (3) their links with the transnational network in the country of origin. The frequency of contact with the different local and transnational networks is interrelated and explained in function of time since migration, and characteristics of the migrants’ relationship (number of children and duration of the relationship).

We use the correlation matrix between the different variables as input for our model in IBM SPSS Statistics Amos 22. This allows the model to treat missing values pairwise. In order for this to produce appropriate results, data must be missing completely at random. This
means that the missing values must be unrelated to the observed values. In our model, composition variables such as share of relatives, share of own friends or share of native friends, are missing by design in a sense as they are missing in case respondents reported no family members (4%) or no friends (8%). Also the frequency of contact with the respective local networks is missing when there are no local family or local friends. These missing data by design can be considered missing completely at random as the estimates from the observed data are expected on average to not be any different from what they would be would there be no missing data (see also Little et al. 2014). This is also the case for transnational contact. However, as we could not include information on the size of the transnational family network or transnational network of friends in our model, but information is available on whether such a network exists or not, this extra information is included in the model by imputing the minimum value on the respective contact scale for those European migrants with no transnational family (4%) or no transnational friends (11%).

Results

Descriptives

We first present descriptive statistics of the variables included in the Structural Equation Models. As can be noticed in table 1, the European migrants with a native partner in our sample have been residing in their destination country for an average of about 13 years. The average number of local family members is 9. These local family members are mainly in-laws: the average share of own relatives in the local family network is only 10 per cent. Furthermore, intra-European migrants have on average 6 local friends. In their friendship network, 77 per cent are own friends, and 58 per cent are native individuals. The factor scales have per definition an average value of 0, except for the scales indicating frequency of contact with transnational networks, since respondents with no transnational family of friends
were attributed the minimum value on this scale. A review of the separate Likert-items to construct the scales (not in table 1), reveals that face-to-face contacts with the local family network of relatives and in-laws are frequent. Nevertheless, 28 per cent reports to meet their local relatives or in-laws less than once a month. Finally, 15 per cent of the respondents reported to meet their local friends less than once a month.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (n= 570; Source: EUMARR Belgian and Dutch survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Migration duration</td>
<td>13.00</td>
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<td>Relationship duration (in years)</td>
<td>10.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>1.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Size local family network (relatives and in-laws)</td>
<td>8.72</td>
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<td>Size local network of friends</td>
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<td>Frequency contact with local family network</td>
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<td>Frequency contact with transnational family</td>
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<td>network (EU)</td>
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<td>Frequency contact with local network of friends</td>
<td>-.27</td>
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<td>Frequency contact with transnational network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share own relatives in local family network</td>
<td>9.59</td>
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<td>Share own friends in local network of friends</td>
<td>70.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share native friends in local network of friends</td>
<td>52.90</td>
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SE path-analysis of the social networks of European migrants

Figure 2 shows the results of the SE path-analysis based on the model presented in figure 1. The path-model explains the frequency of local and transnational contact with family and friends. The goodness of fit indices show that the model fits the data well (see for example Hox and Bechger 2007). In the path diagram, we only included paths where $p < 0.05$. 
Figure 2. SE path-analysis for frequency of contact with local and transnational networks of family and friends (n = 570, $X^2 = 76.458$, p = .000, CFI = 0.962, TLI = 0.931, RMSEA = .044; Source: EUMARR Belgian and Dutch survey)
Figure 2 shows that the size and composition of European migrants’ local networks clearly change over time. Local friendship and family networks become larger with longer residence in the host country (family: $\beta = .11$; friends: $\beta = .24$). Furthermore, the local networks become increasingly composed of more own relatives (as compared to in-laws, $\beta = .59$) and more own friends (as compared to friends met through the partner, $\beta = .25$) over time. Having more own friends and relatives in the local social networks also increases the overall frequency of contact with these networks. Our results further suggest that contact with the transnational networks of family and friends in the EU diminishes over time (respectively $\beta = -.23$ and $\beta = -.30$). Contrary to our expectations, we did not find an effect of the share of own relatives in the host country on contact frequency with the transnational family ($\beta = -.00$; $p = .23$). This result indicates that having more relatives close by is not related to less contact with the family in the home country. Finally, the longer a European migrant resides in the host country, the larger the share of native friends in the local friendship networks ($\beta = .21$). Based on the existing literature, we expected this would lead to closer contact with both the local family network and network of friends. While this holds true for contact with the local family network ($\beta = .15$), a negative relationship is revealed between the share of native friends and with frequency of contact with friends in the host country ($\beta = -.14$). As a result, the total effect of migration duration on contact with the local network of friends appears to be limited ($\beta = .05$, see table 2), and smaller compared to the total effect of migration duration on contact with the local family network ($\beta = .18$).

Our model further confirms how characteristics of the relationship affect the size, composition and frequency of contact with the respective networks. First, the longer the duration of the relationship of European migrants, the lower the share of own friends (not met through the partner) in the local network of friends ($\beta = -.23$). Contrary to our expectations, however, no effect was found on the size of the local friendship network ($\beta = .02$, $p = .65$).
Table 2. Standardized total effects of the basic model and model comparison (n=570; Source: EUMARR Belgian and Dutch survey)

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<td>LOCAL NETWORK</td>
<td># Local friends</td>
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<td>% Native friends</td>
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AIC
BCC
Second, children show to positively affect the frequency of contact with both the local and transnational family network (respectively $\beta = .12$ and $\beta = .06$). Furthermore, having more children is related to having more own local friends ($\beta = .11$) as well as more frequent contact with the local network of friends ($\beta = .07$). Contrary to our expectations, however, we did not find an effect of the number of children on the size of the network of friends ($\beta = .08$, $p = .67$).

Finally, considering the relation between size, composition and frequency of contact with the different networks, it can be noticed that it is not so much the size of the local family network, but rather the composition (the number of local relatives) that translates into more frequent contact with the local family network ($\beta = .24$). Furthermore, the size of the local family network has an impact on the size and composition of the local network of friends. A larger number of in-laws increases the size of the local network of friends ($\beta = .10$) as well as the share of local friends met through the partner ($\beta = -.12$). The effect of size and composition of the local network of friends shows to be much broader. First, the size of the local friendship network positively impacts on frequency of contact with the local network of friends ($\beta = .20$). Second, disposing of more own local friends increases frequency of contact with the local friendship network ($\beta = .14$). In contrast and as reported above, having more native friends has an opposite effect, as it decreases frequency of contact with the local friendship network ($\beta = -.14$).

**Discussion and conclusion**

In this article, we explored a so far neglected topic in international migration research, namely the social networks of intra-EU movers. Our analysis focused on European migrants living in Belgium or the Netherlands who are in a union with a Belgian or Dutch partner. We aimed to advance our current understanding of social networks of intra-EU movers in three
ways. First, we extended the study of migrant social network formation from non-EU migrants to intra-EU migrants. Second, we investigated the relationships between network size, network composition and frequency of contact with both the local and transnational network. Third, we covered family and friendship networks.

First, our analysis revealed that over time, the composition of intra-EU movers’ networks change. Gradually, these networks include more relatives as well as own and native friends. While having more own friends increases contact frequency with the local friendship network, we observed a negative relation between having native friends and contact frequency with this network. This might indicate that intra-EU movers often move within international communities in the country of destination, and more easily establish links with people in the same situation. Frequency of contact with local friends might thus be especially salient when local social networks are mainly composed of other international or co-national peers. This is not implausible, as studies into the social networks of other migrant groups revealed that networks of co-national and international migrants are often important in the initial stages of migration (e.g. Gill and Bialsli 2011). Of course, one should be aware that respondents in our sample who reside in the country longer already might be different in terms of other unobserved characteristics. Migration motives and union formation paths of more recent migrants are potentially different. A recent study on Bulgarian migrants in Spain (de Miguel Luken et al. 2015), furthermore, suggested that while belonging to a mixed union implies a greater presence of natives in the personal network, these are mostly family members of the native partner and the effect on emotional proximity with native alters is none. Deepening our understanding of the relations between European migrants and natives would thus be a logical next path to follow in future research. Furthermore, particularly contacts with transnational friendship networks seem to decline over time. The spatial stretch of a friendship network thus leads to a decrease in contact frequency. Maintaining such ties
requires an active effort, and it can be hypothesised that migrants’ physical absence hampers such maintenance, leading to a progressive decrease in contact frequency, even in the European context, wherein moving internationally is relatively easy and affordable. Surprisingly, our findings show that contact frequency with the transnational family network also declines over time. The wide geographical spread of our sample might explain this finding. It is imaginable, for example, that those who move to a neighbouring country have more possibilities to travel frequently and relatively cheap to their home-country for maintaining social ties compared to those who have to travel over larger distances. While such analysis falls beyond the scope of this paper, and cannot be conducted with our data due to relatively limited numbers of respondents per origin group, it offers an interesting venue for future research. Furthermore, although contact frequency with the transnational family might decrease, this does not necessarily mean that relatives do not maintain an important role for emotional support (e.g. Rooyackers, de Valk and Merz 2014). Lastly, parallel with migration duration, the likelihood of family reunification in the host country might also increase, potentially explaining these results. Unfortunately, our data does not allow shed light on these important issues and the processes of reunification among European migrants are so far unstudied.

Second, and consistent with previous studies, we showed that having children positively impacts the frequency of contact with the local and transnational family network. This shows the important role children have for couples in this stage of life. Furthermore, it indicates that particularly parents are keen to maintain family ties and keep their children connected with both the place of residence as well as with that of origin. Studies on the children of non-western immigrants indicate that balancing these two is crucial for identity development among this group. While there is no effect on the size of the network of friends, the share of own friends in the network and (directly and indirectly) the frequency of contact
with the local network of friends do rise with the number of children. A similar pattern is found for duration of the relationship: while relationship duration does not affect the size of the local friendship network, it does affect the composition (and therefore indirectly the frequency of contact with the local network). European migrants show to have less own friends among their core friendship group the longer the relationship lasts. This finding illustrates the relevance of including different aspects, composition as well as size, when studying the social networks of (European) migrants.

Third, our study reveals it is not so much the size of the local family network, but rather the fact of having own relatives nearby that matters for contact with the local family network. Also for friends, our analysis showed that having own friends that are not met through the partner, are important for closeness of contacts (besides having many friends). Otherwise, the analysis indicated that having more relatives around does not necessarily lead to smaller local friendship networks. Actually, more contact with the local family network is related to more contact with the local friendship network. Consequently, intra-EU migrants do not seem to rely primarily on family or friends in the destination country. Therefore, it seems there is rather an accumulation than a compensation effect: some people are more sociable and have a wider network to rely on, whereas others have a more limited social circle. This calls for a study including more personal traits in order to reveal why some individuals realise a more extensive social network which is of potential impact on both wellbeing of an individual and her/his position in society. In line with this, we revealed a significant relationship between the share of native friends in the local friendship network and the frequency of contact with the local family network. This might be interpreted as more frequent contacts of the European migrant with his/her local in-laws leading to more native friends, which would indicate that in-laws can figure as bridging figures towards the host society as well. On the other hand, this can also indicate that some of the in-laws are actually
considered to be friends by the respondents. Another explanation might be that those with more native contacts establish more easily links with in-laws because of their enhanced knowledge of local customs and the host country’s language through their network of native friends. In any case, both own family and in-laws show to be important in people’s lives, although the levels of contact and exchange might differ across individuals (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Verweij and Kalmijn 2004) as well as across the life-cycle (Van der Pers, Mulder and Steverink 2015). In a context of intra-EU mobility, this closeness is clearly challenged. The effects of migration on families left behind in an EU context is still to be understood. Prospective longitudinal research might be helpful for unravelling the causal mechanisms behind these interpretations as well as better capture the role family and in-laws play in European migrants’ lives.

Although our study advanced current understandings of European migrants’ social networks, some limitations should be mentioned. As we only dispose of cross-sectional data capturing retrospective longitudinal information, we were not able to observe factual changes in the structure and composition of intra-EU movers’ social networks. Future studies into the effects of intra-EU mobility on social network structure and evolution might therefore benefit from longitudinal data, allowing to unravel how social structures change over time. Second, we investigated social networks of intra-EU movers through bi-national couples, who have a privileged bridge towards the receiving society. Future research among intra-EU movers without such privileged connection can shed more light on the dynamics of social network formation of European migrants. Finally, future studies could better capture social networks and their differences in terms of size, composition and contact according to countries of origin and destination, uncovering the heterogeneity and contextual embeddedness of social network formation within Europe. Qualitative studies have the potential to indicate what bonds are maintained and how. On a similar note, it would be promising to compare
European binational couples involving a native partner with binational couples involving a non-EU partner as well as with European binational couples whereby both partners are European migrants. Such comparisons would allow to dig deeper into the specificities of social network formation of intra-EU movers.

In conclusion, we reported a considerable variability in the social networks of intra-EU movers. Our findings revealed that not only the size of social networks should be taken into account, but also the composition and frequency of contact with these respective networks for sketching a nuanced picture of the relevance of social networks in people’s lives. In any case, establishing contact with the local population as well as maintaining contact with social networks at origin is not self-evident, neither for intra-European movers.

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**References**


